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COBALT-SERIES

マリア様がみてる

チャオ ソレツラ!



今野緒雪

集英社

Volume 17

Ciào Sorella!

Prologue

“Good day.”

“Good day.”

Cheerful morning greetings echo through the clear blue sky. Today they once again pass under the tall gates into Maria-sama’s garden where maidens assemble with their pure smiles like angels.

Their bodies, which know no stain, are wrapped in dark-colored uniforms.

The pleats of their skirts should not be disarranged, nor should their white sailor collars flutter; here walking slowly is preferred. Of course, here there are no shameless students that would run to make it before the very last moment.

This is Lillian Girls’ Private School.

Established in the 34th year of the Meiji period, it is said that this academy was founded for the sake of the daughters of the nobility, a traditional Catholic girls’ school.

It is located within the Tokyo Metropolitan area. Even now, much of the original greenery of Musashino remains as, watched over by God from kindergarten to university, this garden undertakes to complete the education of these maidens.

Times change, and from the Meiji Period three times a new era has begun, until the present day Heisei, but for eighteen years, pure young women pass through here for a sheltered upbringing and education in culture. It is a valuable education, but something just as precious is left behind in that school.

“Field Trip: when young, students, to naturally experience a part of the world not in their usual daily life participate in this event, lead by teachers in order to allow them to study culture.” - “Koujien” (a famous dictionary)

--So it says.

Here it comes, the land of not-daily life.

However, transferred to a different location, one should still not walk so that one's sailor collar flutters.

Because we are always watched over by Maria-sama, everywhere we go, there is a feeling of always being nearby.

Grasping the red passport, this will be her first time overseas.

Ciao, Italy!

One week in an unknown country is about to begin.

Each And Every Farewell Gift

Part 1.

“What did you say just now?” In front of the ticket examination booth at M station, Yumi asked. With a pretty stupid face on, she knew, without looking at a mirror.

“Because sometimes you go and do something reckless, I worry.”

After a little delay, like a rewind cassette tape being played back, Sachiko spoke. Well done, with very little changed, an exact copy; unfortunately it wasn't the answer Yumi had requested.

“No, before that.”

“Before? Then ‘Even if the body is weak, the spirit is willing.’”

“One more.”

“One more? ‘Tomorrow's the field trip, isn't it?’”

“Ah, no.”

Okay, okay, the bus that went from school to the M Station north entrance had already arrived and gone back. So then, maybe the tape had already rewind too much. It wasn't the conversation of five minutes ago, more like just about a minute ago.

But let's not get distracted while thinking, her face said, as onee-sama looked at her with an unexpectedly serious face.

At their side, people passed by busily. After the people getting on the train, came the people getting off the train. The area of the ticket barrier was congested with people returning from school and work.

“I said what souvenir would be good and was watching you. And then you said...”

“You mean, when I said, ‘There would be nothing better as a souvenir than you returning safely?’”

“Yes, that was what you answered.” Those words made Yumi terribly happy. After a week, she would become the something that no souvenir was better than. However.

“So then the place where I said that I didn’t understand what buying something had to do with me coming back. And you were saying, as an introductory remark, “You say it so forcefully”, um, weren’t you?”

She must have mistakenly heard it. That was why she was asking her to repeat it. Like, “Why did you say that just now?”

“What?”

“Either **manju from Rome or senbei from Florence.**”

She had inquired gently, but Sachiko-san had already spoken.

“I said that, so?”

She said it. That was what she thought.

What should she do; was this something to smile about, she wondered. Yumi was puzzled. If she slipped and laughed, when the words had been said seriously, Sachiko-sama might go rigid.

Alternatively, if she made the wrong choice it could affect which way Onee-sama’s mood swung. Yumi judged that the former was correct. Belatedly, she laughed at it “Ahaha,” but Sachiko-sama crossed her arms and muttered.

“Last year, we missed a chance to buy them. If the chance presents itself, I don’t care which, but definitely buy some.”

“...Those, where were they sold?”

“Didn’t you understand that I wasn’t able to buy any?”

“Yeah.” So it wasn’t a joke.

“Enjoy yourself.” Sachiko-sama brought the conversation to an end by fixing her tie.

Therefore, Yumi didn’t take step into another question, Onee-sama was fine as she was.

Part 2.

It must be some kind of event, that would make the Hasekura and Shimazu families gather to eat out.

New Year's, Sechibun, Girl's Day, the Equinox, Obon, Christmas, never just for no reason. Although the real motive might just be to get together and be lively, because there seemed to be no prohibition against mixing Shinto, Buddhist and Christian together.

She reached out inelegantly for some water, thinking that, in those days, circumstances made it inconvenient. Although only a few days prior the relatives had all gathered pleasantly.

(Well, why is my body so weak, is what I want to know.)

Before anyone else, Yoshino stepped out of the restaurant, looking up at the night sky. Because the stars were so lovely, she took a deep, resigned breath.

Because, in the past, she couldn't do sports or playing far away, special days could only be celebrated by eating in nearby places. But, since the operation, her health had been sound so, little by little, their behavior had changed to gather to eat at the appropriate time. Father's stomach had been taken over by a tanuki.

(First off. Isn't it just a field trip? Why are we having a bon voyage party at all?)

She heard about it a week ago when she had come home. It seemed a little like an exaggerated version of a farewell party for a salaryman who was going off to the provinces. From the moment they entered the tatami room with the bowing waitress, until the very end, the meaning of this gathering was unintelligible.

(Of course. If the one who looks the youngest gets the seat of honor, they'll be getting partings gifts of words from the adults.)

At that moment she laughed with a small chuckle, and heard from behind the sound of the lattice door opening.

“Yoshino.” Calling her name from close by was Rei-chan. Her cousin, her neighbor, her onee-sama. The one person in the world she loved the most, but from time to time, the one person in the world who vexed her the most. A kind, compassionate and important person.

“Where are all the adults?”

“Mother and Auntie went to the register to pay. Uncle is looking after Father. Because it’s looking like he won’t be able to go on the train, they’re calling a taxi.”

“Did he collapse?”

“He collapsed. With happiness, because Yoshino is going on the field trip like grown woman.”

So, he drank too much to that.

“Mm.”

In elementary school, halfway home. In middle school, her mother would follow her home like a shadow, so as not to be seen by her classmates. But, this time, there would be no special treatment. She had graduated from always having to be the one to take a position at the teacher’s side; she’d be able to enjoy this on the equal footing with her friends.

“Let’s take the train home, us young ones.” Yoshino said, grabbing onto Rei’s shirt. The three people of the Hasekura household. The three people of the Shimazu household. The total of six people would be too many to fit into one taxi.

“Right. That’s what I came to tell you.” Rei retraced her steps inside the lattice door.

As Yoshino glanced at her wristwatch as if to say, “If we leave now, we’ll get home in time for the ten o’clock drama,” Rei made an OK sign.

“Let’s go”, Rei said walking towards the main street, looking back after a moment, Yoshino ran to catch up with her.

Rei took hold of her hand.

Walking happily shoulder to shoulder, this is an irreplaceable thing.

“You know,” Yoshino muttered quietly, then shut her mouth.

“Mm, what?”

“Nothing. L... Let’s get home.”

The reason for taking the train home wasn’t that they were “the young ones.” It was because she wanted them to have some time together. However, she wasn’t going to say that.

It was just that the image of Rei-chan defenselessly delighted just floated into her mind.

But, hand in hand like this, she would be “Kind Yoshino” for a little.

And, for a week they wouldn’t be able to see each other.

But Rei-chan’s face as she looked up into the blue sky and remembered “Sulky Yoshino” would be really cute.



Part 3.

When the phone call came from Noriko it was past ten in the evening.

“I’m sorry for calling so late.”

“It’s fine. We had many people coming to visit, so we’re all up late.”

“But Shimako-san, you’re...”

“Eh?”

“Aren’t you early to bed, early to rise?” At school, Noriko called Shimako “Onee-sama,” but outside school called her “Shimako-san.” When they had first exchanged their vows as sisters, there was some hesitation over the switch, and the way they addressed each other had been shaky, but now all was relaxed. Because she knew that Yoshino-san called Rei-sama, “Rei-chan” in their private life, it seemed to be evenly divided. When she was speaking to a third party, she used “Shimako-sama” and “Shimako-san” properly.

“I’m going to check over the luggage one more time.” Because she’d been getting ready little by little over the last week, her preparations were nearly complete. However, given her nature, she probably had a bookmark in her travel book with a checklist of her property, which she would check once again to make sure nothing had been left out.

“That’s right. When you’re going place to place, you can’t go back to get something.”

“Even so, depending on what they have to sell there, I don’t know if I’d have a chance to shop for anything, do I?”

But that wasn’t really a problem like not having her passport or school uniform. And, if you forgot it, you could always acquire a uniform. So as long as you carried your passport, with the help of friends you could borrow from, your trip wouldn’t have to be interrupted. Whether or not it would be comfortable.

“Me too.” Noriko said. “I’m the type to worry if I’ve left anything too.”

“Really.”

“Yes. If I forget to say something at school, then I get all frazzled until I have to call and say it. Shimako-san.”

“What?”

“Please go and come back safely. Be very careful. Um, because it’s Shimako-san, go ahead and act without reserve and don’t worry.”

“Eh?”

“I’ll be here waiting. Until you return, I’ll be here waiting.”

“Noriko.”

Like, whenever you fly away its okay. So she thought just then, that this person would be here waiting.

She wasn’t a bird tied with fetters, but with an important nest. Lillian Jogakuen was a place that she would return to voluntarily, someday.

“Thank you.” Shimako chewed over the meaning of those words well.

There, her important person waited for her. Just so.

Going Out At the Beginning

Part 1.

Narita Airport's official name is the New Tokyo International Airport.

It was just past ten in the morning. On the international departures floor, girls wearing dark-colored school uniforms were crowded together.

In their hands were red passports. Underfoot were big bags. Their greetings of "Good day" were just a little tense today.

"But, isn't it kind of pointless for us to gather more than two hours early, I wonder," Yoshino-san muttered as the entire class shuffled forward their eyes on the green tickets held in their hands.

"It's because we're traveling overseas," Yumi answered, but Yoshino-san said, "That's not what I meant."

"International phone calls are easily provided and connected, and with the Internet, you can have communications from all over the world in an instant, and using satellites, things can be broadcast across the planet in this era, right? The time it takes to go from country to country is getting shorter, soon it'll be like it's nearby. If we're going somewhere in an Asian country, or somewhere inside the country, we'll arrive much sooner, right?"

"Mmm."

"So for the traveler, the difference between foreign and domestic is in the process of disappearing isn't it?"

So said Yoshino-san, who was escaping Japan for the first time. She knew that, because they went to pick up their passports together.

"So?"

"In other words, I wonder if there isn't a way to make it simpler. Something like, arriving at the airport thirty minutes before, or something like that."

"..."

In other words, Yoshino-san wanted to talk about something, but nothing too difficult, since they had had to get up earlier than thinking was possible, and this was her way of saying “sleepy.” Because she had nothing else to complain about, her words went against “this era” and “simplification,” to dispel her distress.

Halfway, as they passed the place where the Wisteria class gathered, in the middle of the group, she detected Shimako-san.

“Good day. You two came together?”

“Yeah. From K Station on the shuttle bus to the airport.”

“Ah, so that’s the way it was?”

“Yeah. It takes some time, but Onee-sama told me it would be a lot of trouble to carry luggage from one transfer to another. If I rode the bus, as I slept it would take me to the airport.”

“But it looks like Yoshino-san didn’t sleep.”

“With Yumi-san next to me sleeping so pleasantly, her breathing seemed kind of annoying.”

Thinking “can’t sleep, can’t sleep”, Yoshino-san seems to have been too nervous to sleep. She could have taken some of Sachiko-sama’s parting gift of travel sickness medicine, which would knock her out. But to Yumi, to whom sleepiness came naturally, it never even occurred to her. Since Yoshino-san hadn’t said she was feeling travel sick, she wasn’t the kind to think of offering it.

“Excuse me. You three, please look over this way.”

At the sound of the reminiscently said “Over here” they turned, where, instead of a greeting, they heard a pika-sha sound.

“...Tsutako-san.” Everyone recognized the photography club ace. Takeshima Tsutako lowered her camera, said “Gokigenyou” cheerfully and smiled. “I’m just checking the appearance of Rosa Gigantea, Rosa Chinensis en bouton and Rosa Foetida en bouton before they leave. But, it was good timing, huh. Maria-sama’s divine protection, I guess. I’ll be sure to beg for the next three-shot.” Even as she said this, Tsutako-san was pressing down the shutter.

They looked at each other as if they were all thinking. “Oh, well, it can’t be helped,” and posed for the picture politely. As far as traveling went, they would be doing things with their classes, so Shimako-san of the Wisteria group might not be able to be near the Pine group in this way.

“Tsutako-san, are you doing a favor for Mami-san?” The newspaper club could not be indifferent to the event of the high school field trip.

“That is correct.” From behind her back, Yamaguchi Mami-san (current editor in chief of the Lillian Kwaraban) appeared. In her hands, she held writing materials, on standby as always to take a memo for a possible article. She was a good match with Tsutako who never let go of her camera. If those two ever got together as a tag team, they’d be the greatest.

“Mami-san, even outside of school you’re running around busily,” Shimako-san said, chuckling.

“You’ve been back and forth in front of here I don’t know how many times.”

“Did you see? Actually, it was a piece of misinformation. I went all the way to the guide counter.”

“Misinformation?”

“There was an announcement that we heard that called for Satō Sei.”

“Satō Sei!?” Yumi, Yoshino-san and Tsutako-san all repeated at the same time.

“Didn’t I just say it was wrong? It was a different person. Someone must have heard it wrong.”

“The name the announcement called was Katō-san, wasn’t it?” Shimako-san was smiling. Really, it seemed that she had been the only one whose heart had pounded when she heard that. But then she was able to hear it more clearly and she knew that “Katō” had been said and understood it to be another person. She seemed

her usual relaxed self. If it had been her, Yumi thought, who had heard “Odazawa Sacchiko-san,” Odazawa Sacchiko-san,” she would have totally heard “Ogasawara Sachiko-san and would have flown to the place where it had been called from.

“It’s pretty low possibility that someone has the same family and given name ‘Satō Sei’.”

“Ah-, I met a Fukuzawa Yumi-san in the hospital. She was an old lady, about eighty or so,” Yoshino-san said.

“Now that you mention it, There’s a elementary school first-year called Yamaguchi Mami-chan.” That was Tsutako-san.

“Some kind of relative?”

“No, a stranger. Because she was going to the elementary school, I ended up following her from in front of her house. Cute kid. When I got close, I could see her name written on her chest.”

“That’s pretty dangerous, Tsutako-san.”

It was true that she might not be watched because on the outside she looked like a high school girl, but the contents inside was perverted old man. If you pointed it out, someone might say, “It’s fine, she’s seven, eight years too young” but that wasn’t really the point. Mami-san, on hearing that the girl with her name was cute, looked very pleased and was in a good mood.

“But, this is great. Wisteria class and Pine class are in the same group. If it were the reverse route, then Shimako-san would be doing completely different things.”

This is how it was going to be. First, the plane would land at Milan, with all of the second-years together. From that point, they would be split into two group, one traveling from Rome (A Course) and one from Venice (B Course). Because there were six total, each course would have three classes. Both courses, on account of stopping at Florence, could not help but be together for a little there.

“We give our thanks to the teachers in charge of the lottery, and Maria-sama.”

Mami-san and Tsutako-san put their hands together and lifted their heads with their eyes closed. Of course, all that was there was the ceiling.

“Tsutako-san, since when are you the cameraman for the Newspaper club?”

“No, no. I was just doing a favor for Mami-san, and it was just chance that I wanted to do it for myself as well.”

“You mean something like a picture to adorn the Photography club exhibition corner panel?”

“Geez, Yoshino-san, you say it straight don’t you. Can’t you just be out of it for a little while more...” Although she said that, she was obviously full of thoughts about the panel.

Sheesh.

While Yoshino-san and the others played, Yumi thought Tsutako-san seemed to be looking at her from behind with a face that did not seem to be into traveling too much. Because they weren’t in the same room, Yumi wasn’t worried that she’d be taking pictures of her changing clothes or in the bath.

“Is it okay to pray for good fortune from the god of war, I wonder?” Shimako-san said, as if reading Yumi’s mind.

“Thank you. Although we’ll meet from time to time, Bon Voyage to you too, Shimako-san.”

Inclining their heads, the three followed behind each other. They went on to the place where the Pine class was gathered.

Part 2.

Even though this was her first time overseas, as she was prepared, it was easier to leave the country than she had supposed.

“Okay. From here on out, we are no longer in Japan.” That was what the teacher said in a loud voice.

Holding out the passport at the out of country counter to be stamped, it may be that formally it was so, but they were still in Narita Airport. So it totally didn’t feel that way at all.

For instance, although it wasn’t too good an example, if a large earthquake happened now, the airport would also be shaken. Of course, the major point of that story would be, if she was still alive, she might be able to make it home under her own power.

With that, Yumi heard Yoshino-san laugh and mutter into her ear, “But it feels like there’s an awful lot of Japanese people, huh.”

There was a little time yet until it was time to get on board, just now there was a fifteen-minute toilet break. Yumi was finished in the toilet anyway, so halfway back she took a quick peep at the shops; when she saw Yoshino-san inside one, she let her steps wander aimlessly that way. Books, and cosmetics, and drinks and souvenirs, all lined up here and there, surely there was no way you could formally call these “shops”. Other than Yoshino-san, she could see the forms of other students wandering around, despite their teachers’ warnings of “don’t spend all your money before Italy.”

“An awful lot of Japanese people?” Yumi repeated, following after Yoshino-san, who was heading towards the cash register.

“Yeah. I said Japanese, an island surrounded by sea, not adjoining any other country. Therefore, there’s no other country one can walk to from here, don’t you think?”

“Adjoining land...”

I see.

“For instance, residents of France, in the middle of a trip to Italy would know if there was a major earthquake. All transportation would stop. But, in theory, they could walk back to France.

“Because it’s an adjoining land?”

“Exactly. If one is born and raised in such a country, there’s a sense of it being a very far away country that one can’t reach under one’s own power, right?” To take it to an extreme, what about a house built on a border, where one room could be in two different countries, it seems possible.”

“Hehhh...”

“But, because it’s an island country, the feeling of leaving one’s native country is very strong, I think.”

This isn’t Japan anymore.

So she had to say Italy, specifically, because if it were America, there wouldn’t be a division.

What is the currency of this some other country?

While these thoughts crashed against one another in Yumi’s head, Yoshino-san took out Japanese yen to purchase one tube of lip cream.

“Right. The price tag has a Yen mark, huh. Just like a regular store.”

Laughing heartily, Yoshino-san said, “Not really,” and glanced at the receipt. “There’s no sales tax.”

I see. This wasn’t Japan, nor was it really outside, she guessed.

Part 3.

She put her luggage above her seat, like it was rush hour. Because it was packed with the bags of the entire second-year traveling student body of Lillian Jogakuen.

For the Lillian field trip, to avoid the problem of shortening travel time, it was decided to keep all luggage as carry-on, to be taken by hand onto the plane. When it is condensed, one's personal effects for travel overseas and travel domestically aren't that much different.

For the trip out the dress policy was uniform only, afterwards at the hotel room pajamas, and travel toiletries, that sort of thing. A suitcase wasn't really a necessity in that case. --In the opinion of the school, that was.

But everyone involved were young women. This and that, one object or another gets thrown into the bag, kapow. The selection of one's personal effects, whether to pick face cream, or washing soap, had to be divided by worth, and only when a person had packed to the very limit could they decide whether to take it out or put it in. And finally, when the fastener closes, this is the bag that she put in the overhead storage. Somehow, it had to be lined up and arranged. It was a little like a puzzle, taking things out and putting them in, until it was as done as possible and she shut the cover on the whole shelf. Those students who got their luggage into storage above their seats were lucky. There were those unfortunates whose luggage had ended up with a different class.

"For about thirteen hours, please be kind to me." Tsutako-san, who was in the seat next to her until they hit Milan, asked in a formal greeting as she closed her seat belt.

"Tsutako-san, are you sure you don't want the window?"

"It's fine, it's fine. I'm more interested in the people inside the plane than what's outside of it."

“Is that right?” As she said that, the plane began to move slowly. From out of the window, she could see the scenery ahead become the scenery behind as proof of their progress. At that, something like voices rose in an “ohhh”. It might be a faint that had no connection or something. That was, the plane moves to face the opposite way it seemed. Although this was a school for rich girls, there were many students, like Yumi, for whom this was a first time going overseas, and, of course, not a few for whom this was a first time on a plane.

The screen directly ahead of her showed the right way to use a life jacket and the emergency evacuation procedure being repeated on a loop. The cabin crew onee-san also showed how to use the vests if they were not in the sky. For the moment, everyone paid attention, with differing degrees of attention probably dependent on how many times they had been on a plane.

That must be it.

In the meantime, the plane was moving forward. There was no departure bell, as there was on the train, where they would start to move upwards, where they would head for takeoff that kind of thing. She didn’t know.

“Oy, Michiyo-san is shaking and praying.” Tsutako-san muttered, leaning over in the aisle seat. “It would be possible to spin around if I didn’t have to do up the seatbelt.”

“...That’s awful.”

The truth was that, even if this plan that was about to fly was made from metal, people living today were too accepting. Michiyo-san, who was praying to god, and Sachiko-sama who took medicine to make her sleep and the other people who were fighting against their instinctive fear in order to survive inside the airplane do so in order to function correctly.

“Well, it’s good to state one’s honest opinion up front, right? Mm, well, but that’s pretty pitiful. But, I think it would have made a nice picture. A frozen bird expression, Oh well, it’s too bad. For me taking it, not for her.”

As expected from Tsutako-san, who had received a mission from heaven to preserve beautiful high school girls in the “now.” But saying it was different.

“Whoah.”

The plane made a ‘goooo’ noise and accelerated gradually, and all at once, they were flying. The moment the wheel left the ground there was a strange floating feeling that felt gross but after that, it was fine. It was like a jet coaster, but one did not receive the outside wind directly, did one? In reality, there was no way to compare it with a jet coaster, but that was all she had to compare it to.

“Wah, high.”

Looking out the window at the scenery, now that they were flying, everything was getting smaller and smaller.

“Heey, Tsutako-san. I wonder if this is what Maria-sama feels like, when she’s watching us.”

Pulling on her sleeve as she said it, Tsutako-san laughed with her whole body.

“I repeat my previous remark, Yumi-san is, as always, interesting.”

And so, at 12:30, the Lillian Jogakuen High School second-year class, took off from Tokyo New International Airport and left on their trip.

Part 4.

When the scenery outside had become only blue sky and white clouds, the “Fasten Seat Belt” sign was turned off. Students, in the act of relaxing, began to take out novels, or card decks, the kinds of goods one used as companions for long trips, or moved around the seats. Whatever had been said, Italy was far away. Because it would take more than half a day riding on the plane, if at all possible, they’d like to pass the time pleasantly. Michiyo-san, who had been trembling, turned serious, probably because she couldn’t spend thirteen hours scared, and was now playing Daihinmin with Itsue-san and the others. But, on the other hand, playing cards in airplane seats that did not turn seemed fairly difficult.

While flying in a plane overseas, one moved in order to become accustomed to the time at the destination and for one’s general health.

So, the guests all set their wristwatches back seven hours. That having been done, it was a little strange. It had now been changed to about five in the morning. It was like using a time machine, but is there really a way in which time can be restored? It was an interesting feeling.

“But on the way back, those seven hours are taken back.”

“Ah, is that right. Then, if one spends one’s entire life in Italy, one has gained seven hours?”

“Wait, can you just stop? That kind of seriously goofy talk. If I have to listen to that kind of thing from Yumi-san it’ll drive me mad.” Standing up in the seat in front of her Yoshino-san said over her shoulder.

“Actually, the time isn’t returned, because there’s really no loss or gain. What year, month day it is, are just conveniences for humans speech, that’s all. Whether the International Date Line is crossed or the calendar changes because one is headed to Italy. Wherever on the earth Yumi-san might go to, no matter how far away, the way time flows in Yumi-san’s body won’t change.”

“Is that limited to the Earth?”

Because this kind of question caught her up for a bit, this time it was Tsutako-san who answered.

“If you’re going into space, then the Urashima effect is involved isn’t it?”

“The Urashima effect?”

“The problem that, when traveling around space with a spaceship near the speed of light, upon coming back, more time has passed than on earth, is what I’ve heard. If you don’t understand Einstein’s theory of relativity, you won’t comprehend it.”

“How about Tsutako-san? Do you comprehend it?”

“I’ve had it told to me, and it’s in my head, but my comprehension isn’t perfect.”

She’d had it told to her, and it’s in her head, Yumi was impressed.

“Urashima Tarou, did he ride a spaceship to the palace of the sea goddess?”

“The turtle was a UFO, Otohime was an alien. That explanation would work.”

Therefore, when he returned, several hundred years had passed, just so.

Having gone into space, ‘It’s not possible to draw it’, then.”

“As you say. But we get an in-flight meal in an airplane.”

The cabin crew onee-san began to push a wagon with breakfast (more like a late lunch) and gifts. This was an Italian company’s airplane, so everything was half and half for Japanese people (or similar) and Italian people (or similar.)

On the menu, breakfast was a light meal of a cheese and ham with mayo open sandwich and a salad; unsatisfactory for a growing child, but thinking about the distant future. After all, they wouldn’t get too much exercise in the plane, so you wouldn’t want it to be too many calories.

“Tsutako-san, take a picture of this meal.” Mami-san said.

“Eh-. I’m not using my precious film on something like this,” Tsutako complained, to which Mami-san replied, “Fine, then” and took out her own camera.

“Take it with this disposable camera, although it’s pretty weak at taking pictures.” They’d be blurry and out of focus, she was saying.

“Okay, okay.” Tsutako-san stabbed an olive with the plastic toothpick above the cheese and rose from her seat unwillingly. Really, she had no interest in anything other than people (high school girls.) But, after fiddling with the disposable camera for a while, she found a suitable angle and took a few pictures.

After the meal, the lights were turned off. If this were really the local time, they would all be active. So what was up with this?

“So we don’t complain. If the customers are sleeping, the inside of the plane is the most peaceful and nice,” Tsutako-san said, as she put the blanket around her neck and rolled over.

Guess so. If the customers were all awake, the cabin crew would have no time off. Furthermore, for the customers, the most tedious part of the flight time is eliminated when they sleep.

However, what about those people who didn’t want to sleep – who were fine being awake. They had to rely on a pinpoint reading light, you couldn’t literally read. And, when here and there one hears the breathing of someone sleeping peacefully, certainly one is more likely to get sleepy, and emulate your friend in the next seat by covering yourself with a blanket and sleeping. When she leaned back to recline, Yumi tried to call out to her classmate in the seat behind her, but she had already gone to sleep just after she had started on her journey. Yumi didn’t want to wake her, so she brought the seat down so as to not wake her.

What was Onee-sama doing just about now?

She had changed the time on her watch, so she didn’t have a sense of what time it was. If she thought about it, and added seven hours... But she had one foot in the land of sleep. She thought that making the calculation would just be too difficult right now.

Part 5.

In this situation, Sachiko-sama would have totally been nodding with sleep.

Eat a meal, sleep, go to the toilet, sleep, eat a meal, when this life inside the plane is just about over, one has the feeling of having been under a broiler.

“Jet lag doofiness wins over flight doofiness. My body feels like it’s trying to adapt to Japan and Italy time.”

“I had a lot of weird dreams.”

“Mm. Although I slept a lot comparatively, I’m tired, you know.”

“I never had to time to open the books I brought to kill time.”

Alighting in Milan’s Malpensa Airport, each and every one of those from Lillian Jogakuen wanted to roll their shoulders and necks. The local time was just after 6PM.

For today, the trip was to stay in Milan with no plans. This was a stopping over point, after a few hours it would be dark, so they would fly by airplane to the first place to visit. A Group was going to Rome, B to Venice.

In other words, it was like an overseas visitor landing at Narita Airport, and transferring to a plane to Nagoya or Fukuoka, something similar to that. Probably.

There were two hours until they had to board the plane for Rome, so they all took a toilet recess and had about an hour to move about freely. Of course, the migration was as followers. They moved about in groups of more than two.

After thirty minutes, they returned for roll call. A restriction, you could say. But, you couldn’t really complain “You’re all irritating” or “they’re being overprotective” or that they don’t care at all, since it was their first vacation abroad. It would be really bad if anyone went lost in this place. The uneasiness one had when one ran errands alone for the first time was remembered for many years.

It may seem obvious, but there was no Japanese in this airport. There seemed to be Italian and English, without confirming each one with the alphabet, they looked kind of like Ttiticaca. It just wasn't natural to the eye, which made them realize just how much experience with Hiragana, Katakana and Kanji they'd had in their lives. Once in a while, they'd see a display in Japanese meant for tourists, and that alone made them happy.

Inside the airport, they were definitely in the home of fashion, Italy, as there were a great number of brand-name duty-free shops all lined up. As she had decided on 2,000 yen for personal expenses at the outset, she couldn't buy shoes or a bag, even if she was secretly carrying her family's company credit card, it wouldn't be possible to bring it home, as there was no extra carry-on space. Banning suitcases was also a precautionary measure to avoid excessive purchases.

"Students who need coins, please come forward," Katori-sensei said to the students of Pine class who were gathered for roll call. Although money exchange should have been completed in Japan, that was only a paper money exchange and now that they had reached Italy, they needed to procure smaller money amounts. This country was very different from Japan about tips. At hotels and restaurants it was indispensable to leave gratuities for service, all of which had explained in an earlier meeting at school.

The teachers had already collected small change as soon as they had arrived, and were breaking bills for those who wanted. In a broad sense, exchanging money might be social study, but this was probably more for the convenience of inexperienced students.

"How about you, Yoshino-san?" Yumi who had gone to the toilet and returned with her, looked at her and asked.

"Last year Rei-chan brought some home without using it completely. It should be good for now, right? After that, when I buy souvenirs, I'll break one then, I guess... Oh."

Yoshino-san closed her mouth with the feeling of “oh, crap.” Her having a little over 2,000 yen in small change appeared to have been a secret. Saying that, how much had she decided would be used for sweets on the trip, with a little left over for tax, seemed to be the crime.

“Yumi-san, what are you doing?”

Yumi in the opposite situation, shook back and forth, wavering. Exchanging at the “Bank of Katori-sensei” did not seem like very much fun.

“I want to break this myself. To experience something.” Because she had come to Italy, she wanted to do things that could only be done here. After all, the objective of the field trip was to teach them about daily things you couldn’t study otherwise.

“Ohh, a challenge - “ Yoshino-san clapped her hands.

Now that she had decided that, she had to figure out the means.

What came to mind immediately as a way to break money was to go shopping. This would be called the, “Go into a duty-free store and buy something cheap to get change” strategy. It had to be a pretty useless purchase, since she was looking at a long day, and needed to think how much more money she’d need.

“Something like gum or chocolate would be okay, right?” Yoshino-san pointed to the nearest corner register, but nothing came to Yumi. Getting candy she didn’t eat could be risky.

“So, a challenge, huh?”

“But, look. It’s okay if I buy something but, what if it’s totally unpalatable? My spending money is a precious resource.”

“Well, you have a point there.”

In keeping with this being Italy, the candy all looked fashionable, with a feeling like there were many colors and flavors added.

“Then, how about chocolate? That’s a major thing sold in Japan.”

“Hmm.” If Yumi ate that, she’d understand the flavor. She picked up a brown bag with button-like chocolates with multi-colored coatings inside.

“But, isn’t chocolate also a gamble?” While it was the perfect size to put inside her bag without breaking the seal, once opened, the contents might spill out unless you closed it with a rubber band, and after who knows how long in her bag might get dirty. Or even worse, if the bag is left for a day in a warm place.

If she were a methodical person she was likely to take such things into account, but when faced with other people’s zeal, her character was likely to lose her attention; as Yumi stood there for ten self-conscious minutes.

“Then, what do you think is good? It’s just about time for us to wander back to the group.”

“Hmm.”

It was a cheap, small and not terribly risky item. If it had been a Japanese convenience store, there probably wouldn’t have been any difficulty coming to a conclusion. Because she was impatient, her head spinning seemed worse.

“I got it, here.” Yumi quickly, from the shelf on the side, with a heave pulled a package.

“What’s that.”

“A magic marker.”

“I can see that, but...” Yoshino-san did not seem pleased with the first foreign purchase being a magic marker.

“You can buy those in Japan.”

“It’s fine. Chocolate is the same isn’t it. The point here is to buy one thing in order to get some change. If I can clear that, this will be a success.”

“Yeah, but a marker...”

“For marking up the map of Italy. Like, “I was at this place.” When I get home to Japan, I can use it. Like, for underlining things in my textbook.”

“Right, right, got it. I got it, so hurry up and buy it already. I’ll wait for you at the store exit.”

“R... Roger -”

Yumi lined up at the register, waiting her turn. As expected from an international airport. Looking around, she could see people with different hair and skin colors, shopping happily for goods that they desired. The black Lillian school uniforms stood out a little. Students who were here and there, besides Yumi, were being showered with attention from foreigners. No, here the Japanese people are the foreigners.

“B... Bon giorno.”

Upon entering the shop, first, give a greeting. What she had been taught was defended when the woman at the register, when she said that, turned to her and replied, “Buona sera.” In Japan, the boundaries between “Konnichiha” and “Ohayou” and “Konbanwa” are a little vague, so it couldn’t be helped. If she thought about it, the standard at Lillian Jogakuen, “Gokigenyou” was a reasonable greeting.

After that had passed, Yumi happily paid for the marker in bills and accepted her change in coins successfully. Her first errand complete. Because it was a store in the airport, the register worked out the amount of money so it was possible to leave without speaking Italian or English.

Running back to Yoshino-san quickly, about halfway, the words “Rosa Gigantea” came to her ears. Turning around to look over her shoulder, there wasn’t anything, just a bunch of Lillian students standing around in a group.

(Shimako-san, what are you up to, I wonder.)

She might have turned around to hear, but directly in front of her, Yoshino-san was putting out a silent pressure to “hurry up,” and in that group she didn’t see any close friends, so she stopped.

At any rate, it’s one thing if it were Yumi or Yoshino-san, but scrupulous and trustworthy Shimako-san, she couldn’t think what she had done. ---Thinking about it, Shimako-san was over at the gathering place for Wisteria class.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Ah, you want to buy something else?”

“Heheheh. The first chore was to change some money,” Yumi laughed brightly, supplemented by Yoshino-san at the her side, with “So, a marker.”

“Right... Ah, that’s right.”

As if she was saying “I remember,” Shimako’s slapped a fist into her palm. She had no interest in the marker.

“I wanted to consult the two of you, I had thought. I wonder if it would be all right for the three of us to contribute to a souvenir for the Rose Mansion.”

“I think it’s okay.”

“Ah, yeah.”

That was economical. That way, they could buy something nice. Neither Yoshino-san nor Yumi had an objection. There was tacit consent that that would happen.

“At the airport on the way home would be fine. This way we don’t have to carry it.”

“Maybe something to eat, I guess. Recently Tōko-chan and Kanako-chan have been helping out, so we should get enough for them.”

“Is that right. That shop back there looked good.”

“All right. But, it’ll be fine, because we’ll have time again between connecting flights on the way home.”

Shimako-san and Yoshino-san moved ahead rapidly with the discussion which, in Yumi’s head something swelled hazily.

Keyword was souvenir. And, something to eat.

“Um. What kind of souvenir?” At the end, perplexed Yumi decided to open up to the other two.

“What?”

“Are you thinking of something good?”

Ah, with those faces full of expectation turned towards her, it became difficult to speak. But, because she had already begun to say it, she had to keep going to the end, or she wouldn't be able to. Whatever reaction awaited her afterwards.

“If we can do it, maybe manju from Rome or senbei from Florence would be good...”

Needless to say, Shimako-san and Yoshino-san stiffened for a little while.

Part 6.

The entrance to Rome, the Fiumicino Airport, known as the Leonardo da Vinci Airport; even in Japan the artist's name was well known.

The flight from Milan took just over an hour. At the time of arrival, it was already past 9:30PM.

"Phew, we're finally here."

But their relief was a little early. To get from the airport to the hotel in the city they would still have to take a bus.

During the wait for the teachers' suitcases (the luggage that had been brought from the side of the school were rather large) down the luggage carousel, roll call was taken and the plans for tomorrow were reviewed, then from there, the three classes went to the airport entrance, dispersed and got onto the two charter buses.

The way it shook invited sleep.

She was falling asleep a little when her classmates' "Whahhh" perked her up a little. And when Yumi looked out the window, she too lifted her voice up in a "Wahhh."

Running on ahead was a road that would seem normal anywhere in Japan. But at some point a ruined town had wandered into it.

"Pretty."

One after another, ancient stone buildings appeared in the light, looking just like a movie set. However, unlike a movie set, here and there they were mingled together with modern things. A billboard for some brand, display window, traffic signal, pedestrian crossing lines, electric street lights, were here and there as if they were natural, they had a claim on existence within this impressive ancient capital.

Before long, the bus entered a road between trees and stopped. A glance at her wristwatch said 10:30. This time they had arrived at the hotel.

In the lobby keycards were distributed, and as if they were being driven, they boarded the elevator. Because this was not a very large hotel, two buses worth of students who weren't yet going to their rooms were packed in tightly.

"231." Looking at the keycard, she pressed down on the panel, and the "2" button lit up.

"But it seems that that's not the second floor." Mami-san said, glancing at her memo pad. In Europe the method of counting stories was different than what was spoken. In Japan, the ground floor was called the first floor, and from there on up, you added a floor as you went out. In other words, here the ground floor is floor zero. In Japan, floors below the ground floor were numbered in the same way. Moreover, because at a hotel in the middle there may be a breakfast hall, which floor would be the one for Room 231 wasn't easily calculated.

"Ah -, I'm tired."

When they entered the room, her roommate Yoshino-san collapsed onto the bed nearest the door.

"Ah, Yumi-san, is this bed okay? If not, we can change quickly."

"Uh-uhn. Either one is fine." Shaking her head, Yumi walked up to and put her bag on the empty bed. She wasn't of a nature to have to be concerned about going to the bathroom at night, or worry about footsteps in the hall. It didn't appear that either the right or left bed would differ in snugness.

"Then, just for a moment," Yoshino-san said, with her eyes closed, as she rolled back and forth.

"You'll rumple your uniform."

"Mm."

Although, with her shoes barely off, she probably shouldn't be talking about manners. Once more she thought to get up, but her determination wasn't quite attached.

Sheesh. Yumi opened the fastener on her shoes, took out a t-shirt and capri pants and changed her clothes. She wanted to sit on the bed, but had to endure a second dance of Yoshino-san's. In a two-person room, it was all over when both collapsed.

At the time she had taken off her uniform and hung it up. She had taken the change from the pocket and placed it on top of the nightstand. She had it there, prepared for a tip if she needed help with her luggage from the bellboy. As it happened, she had carried her own luggage up to the room, so she could leave whatever she hadn't used for the room maid in the morning.

Taking out her travel slippers, she took off her socks and slipped them on her bare feet. Her feet breathed a sigh of relief and she finally had leisure to look around at the room.

Ivory walls, carpet of deep violet with dark red florets, the fittings and furnishings were all a light brown, the room was simple, with a slightly retro feel to it. However, the curtains were asserting themselves. Yellow and deep green stripes of different widths with flowers floating above, it was a showy, fashionable design, also used on the one-person sofa in the room.

"Yoshino-san."

"Mmmmmmmmm, just a little longer."

"Guess it can't be helped, huh." Yumi went into the bathroom, and turned on the hot water for the bathtub.

As the hot water spread into the tub she was determined to not allow it to overflow. At their orientation meeting, this was emphasized. Somehow, last year, the water had overflowed in a bathroom, and leaked to the room on the floor below, injuring a sempai.

If she did something like that, it would be a considerable failure, so as a precaution, when the water reached a decent level, Yumi shut it off. While checking that the temperature of the water, Yumi also checked out the inside of the bathroom.

"It's gorgeous..."

The wall and alcove were made from marble the color of caramel ice cream. This was that. Right, marble.

The bathtub and sink were white ceramic, as was the washbasin, the urinal and --.

“Oh, just as the rumors said.”

A bidet. In Europe, one used it for washing after going to the toilet. Now that she had an actual one in front of her eyes, she couldn't figure out how to use it on her own. At the orientation meeting it had been explained, ‘It is not a washstand for children,’ and also the teacher said, ‘It looks like it's used for that,’ almost to the point of striking a pose because they couldn't actually see one.

“Um about this, how do you actually use it –” She opened the door speaking in the general direction of Yoshino-san. But there was no expected answer.

That was a little boring. The whole point was that she wasn't alone and that their chitchat would be fun.

After a moment, the hot water was filled.

“Yoshino-san, the bath is ready. Get in.” She returned to the room, and shook her sleeping friend's shoulder, with the phrase “new wife” thrusting deeply into her heart.

“Yu... san... ga... head... leeze. Li'... mo... slee...”

“Huh?” It was a difficult cipher to decode, maybe, ‘Yumi-san, go ahead, please. I want a little more sleep.’

“Geez, Yoshino-san.”

“Mm.”

That's no good. But in this instance, it might be okay to allow her to have a nap. It could be pretty miserable to rouse her. She's not a baby, after all, and at least she wouldn't fall asleep in the bath this way.

How would Yoshino-san's long-time companion Rei-sama deal with this, Yumi wondered as she took her washing things out of a vinyl bag, took new underwear and went into the bathroom.

“Ah, right, right.” She went back the way she had come, took her school uniform from the closet and into the bathroom. She hung the hanger on the hook on the back of the door. It was light and the steam would probably press the cloth.

Everything was prepared. Just as she was getting into “bath time” Yumi noticed the flag.

“...Do not use for bathing. In other words... There is not enough hot water.”

When in Rome, do as the Romans do. However, Japanese people like their bath. In any case, she submerged herself in the water.

“While I’m in the tub, I’ll wash my hair and body and face... After all, now that it’s all here, there’s no point in wasting it.”

In the Fukuzawa household, they would reheat the water so all four members of the household could have water hot enough to burn. So wasteful. However, it was impossible to use shampoo or soap. At least she was entering deliberately. The body relaxes so much from a hot bath that weariness was driven away, and she was once again awake.

“This is no good. If I fall asleep here, it’s no joke that I might drown.”

It would be tomorrow soon. In Japan the time was 8 AM. Although she had had a nap in the plane, it hadn’t been more than small bits of superficial sleep. Naturally she was sleepy.

As she yawned, she washed her whole body and bath time was over.

While she was drying her hair with the hair dryer provided, because it would be Yoshino-san’s turn next, she cleaned the tub. But, because the showerhead was affixed to the wall, as it was at the school pool, it was hard to get at the foam gathered on the tub sides. Of course, that seemed suitable since she had washed herself.

“Yoshino-san, I’m coming out. Wake up.”

“Mm.” When Yumi came out into the bedroom, Yoshino-san sat, still wearing her school uniform, next to the bed.

“Are you going to take a bath? If not, I’ll turn off the water.”

“I’m not going in right now,” came the vague answer.

“You’ll go in afterwards?”

“I don’t know.”

“Anyway. Because you might catch a cold, you should get some sleep. Look, take off your school uniform. You can hang it up and leave it in the bathroom.”

“Can’t do it.” So saying, Yoshino-san, listless lifted both hands in front of her.

“Guess there’s no helping it...” Yumi reached out and pulled her hands. “Hey, let’s wake up.”

I didn’t want to be a mother just yet. Even if you didn’t call it that, that was what she was doing.

“Huh?” Just then, Yumi noticed it. “...Yoshino-san.”

“What?” Yoshino-san

Yoshino-san, who had sat up with so much effort, turned and looked at Yumi with an out of it face.

“Do you have a fever, maybe?”

“Who knows, I’d say, but I think so. But because Yumi-san’s hands don’t feel cold or anything, I don’t think it’s that bad.”

“But then it is! Because I’ve just now come out of a bath and am downright hot.” So then, Yoshino-san’s hands were the same temperature.

“I’m calling the teacher.”

In case anything happened for which she might need to do that, she had written a memo on a piece of paper with the teacher’s room number on it. When Yumi went to search for it, Yoshino-san grabbed her arm and said, “It’ll be fine, please.”

In other words, don’t tell the teacher. Although she wasn’t feeling well, with her remaining strength, this came across strongly.

“But.”

“It’s a slight fever. I get them all the time. If I get some sleep with a cold towel on my forehead, I’ll cool off. So.”

“Yoshino-san...”

Tears fell from Yoshino-san’s eyes. Her body wasn’t in pain. That anyone else should know about it, these tears fell from mortification.

“This is just like always, huh?” Yumi stood by the bed at knee level and looked at Yoshino-san’s face.

Yoshino-san gave a small, but clear nod.

“If we put cool water on your forehead, you’ll get well, huh.”

“Yeah.” This time her voice came clearly.

“I understand. Then, let’s do that.” Having said that, the first thing to do was to shut the hot water off in the bathtub. After that, she took Yoshino-san’s pajamas out of her bag. Once she changed her clothes, she could go to sleep properly.

“Is the smallest size hotel towel okay?”

“Um, actually. In the pocket of my bag, there’s a hand towel, if you would.”

“In the bag pocket, okay.” Searching in the indicated place, was a chick-patterned hand towel which she took out.

“...This, it’s pretty old.” The color was fairly faded and it had marks where here and there it had come unraveled. This towel had felt much like a truly precious old stuffed animal.

“Mm. But it’s a magic towel. Every time I get a fever, it brings it down. When I was little, I couldn’t sleep without it.”

“Is that so. Well, let’s get it to work.” Yumi took the towel, rinsed it in the washbasin, wrung it out lightly and placed it on Yoshino-san’s forehead.

“Thank you. That feels nice.”

“Good. I’m glad.” Yumi took Yoshino-san’s pillow and pulled up a chair, then sat. She couldn’t judge, but it looked like Yoshino-san’s face was clear.

“My heart doesn’t spasm anymore, however. Whenever I get very tired, I get a fever. But, little by little they’re getting fewer.”

“Mm.”

“Sorry.” Yoshino-san confessed. “If the teacher found out, I couldn’t stand it if I wasn’t allowed to go together with everyone.”

“Is that right.”

Because she had a weak constitution, she had always been given special extracurricular lessons, stayed by the teacher’s side, had just watched when the playing got hard, been exempt from her share of the work, that sort of thing. She had never really been able to become close with her classmates, and in some respects had felt very alienated from them. Nevertheless, she had participated if at all possible. On days they took class trips, she had taken the day off.

“The hotel is assigned by homeroom, right. My number one strongest wish was to be in the same room with Yumi-san, you know? When everyone pulled.”

“Is that so.” As she answered, Yumi could remember that time well. “The same room as Yoshino-san, by all means,” she had said pretty straight, but her frankness made her happy. With Yoshino-san’s character, she did not think she had ideas like that.

“Mm. It’s so. That was, you know, if that somehow didn’t happen, what I was thinking.” Another classmate might have easily consented, for the same reason.

They had both attended Lillian since kindergarten, but this was the first time Yumi had ever been in the same class with Yoshino-san. However, those students who had been together with Yoshino-san, surely remember her as she was before the surgery. If, while traveling, there was any possibility her health had would become bad, so Yoshino-san should have someone reliable at her side, they judged.

“Yumi-san. You’ll take care of me, right?”

It was like a line in an old comic play, something an old sick man would say to his daughter. To continue, the daughter would say something like, “You promised not to say that.”

“We’re friends, right? Doing things like this for friends is part of the role. Therefore, don’t worry about it, don’t worry about it.”

Previously, the former Rosa Chinensis, Mizuno Yōko-sama had said that. About the time of the Yellow Rose Revolution, maybe?

“But, that’s looking at it objectively. I don’t feel that I must take care of Yoshino-san. It’s more like I’m saying that I feel it’s something I would do for a friend, I think.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t talk anymore. Go to sleep.” Yumi turned the room lights down. “But tomorrow morning if your fever hasn’t gone down, I’m telling the teacher.”

“I understand.”

She was on the side of her own bed, but she had no interest in sleeping. Her body was very tired but her nerves were strained. She wanted to be able to change the towel on Yoshino-san’s forehead a few times. Which way to go, but then she resigned herself to not getting too much sleep tonight. (I wonder if I’ll be able to wake up tomorrow morning.)

Hmm. Well if she was wrong about that, her body would be revitalized. Darn it, she hadn’t set the alarm to waken them.

(Um, Pine Group’s breakfast time tomorrow is... So)

Hoping she didn’t wake already sleeping Yoshino-san, she rose from her bed, and checked the trip flyer.

(7:15 to 7:45?)

It wouldn’t be necessary to wake up before seven then. No, if you didn’t mind not saying “Itadakimasu” with everyone gathered, you could arrive at the dining hall at half past seven. And it was only limited by class in order to avoid them all concentrating all at one time.



Brush one's teeth, wash one's face, change into one's school uniform. The whole sequence should take about fifteen minutes, so she decided that they'd get up at seven o'clock. Hair care could wait until after breakfast.

(Now then, awake with the day--)

In the space between the beds, she searched around for the night table. Normally, it was in that area. In the hotel they had stayed in for family trips, it was mostly next to the telephone.

But.

(Nothing)

To travel well, one could get things one hadn't brought at the hotel. If one didn't have a toothbrush, or slippers, or a robe, they had heard from the teacher, but no way would they have an alarm clock she thought. Because she had her wristwatch, she hadn't ever thought about any other clock.

(Mo, morning wake up call?)

In Japanese hotels, there was no such thing. However, she wouldn't be able to wake up by herself, so she had no choice but to rely on it.

(I can't even discuss it with Yoshino-san.)

She might have questioned the teacher, but it was the middle of the night at past one o'clock already. And if she called the teacher's room, and was asked about Yoshino-san's condition, she wasn't confident that she could lie well.

All the time she was lost, the time tick-tocked away. Determined, Yumi turned towards the phone. The telephone was a very typical push type, it looked like next to the numbers there were shortcut dial buttons. Maybe on one of those buttons were small letters indicating a morning call, but the buttons didn't glow.

(...So I should call the front desk?)

However, there were no characters that said Front.

(Um - . Where would be best -)

Room Service, Housekeeping or Laundry didn't seem right. The only things left were Operator or Reception. Her image of the Operator was something like a message switching center, and she wasn't sure what Reception was.

(So. Do something, Yumi.)

Alternatively, which one she should choose? She didn't have any confidence. Next time, on the very brink of a vacation abroad, please bring an alarm clock and an English-Japanese dictionary, she vowed in her heart, as she reached out for the telephone receiver. If she was mistaken, she'd try to put it right at that time. She pressed the button marked Reception.

"Hello?"

After it rang five times, the opposite party picked up. It was a man's soft voice. Because he spoke quickly, she wasn't sure what he said, maybe something like "What do you want?" she thought.

"Um, mo--" Even as she spoke, she said, "wrong" and thought to correct herself.

"Weiku appu co-ru, purii-zu."

Morning call was a made up Japanese English word that wouldn't be understood. She remembered the teacher telling her that word at the time they had had an English reader. When a person is cornered, many memories would be opened up and pulled out.

"Atto, seben."

Wahhh, what great monotonal English. When she had had that reader, she should have worked harder on her English pronunciation.

But, mm, in this situation, communicating would be enough, so she turned serious. She should begin the sentence with 'Could you' or 'would you' but as long as she could say it well enough to communicate, it couldn't be helped.

"OK."

From the telephone came the answer. Somehow she had been understood. After that, once again came the blah blah, but really she didn't hear it. It was barely possible to catch 'seven' and '231' after which she said "Yes."

"Ni-san-ichi, ne. Oyasuminasai." So saying, the telephone cut off. Japanese people must often visit. It was a cut above, handling things that way.

After rinsing the towel on Yoshino-san's forehead once more, she crawled into bed.

The eight hours longer than usual day was finally over.

The problem of the alarm clock had been cleared up.

She couldn't take a little sleep. She wasn't Yoshino-san, but once she shut her eyes she wouldn't be getting up for a while.

Leisurely Dialogue

Part 1.

Her eyes were open before the wake up call came. The sound of rain came to her ears. It was dark, maybe because of the weather, or was it because the curtains were closed. Either that, or it was still night and dawn had not come.

Getting up and, walking over next to the window, would soon confirm what it was, but her eyelids and body were heavy and she rolled herself up in the blanket. Her nose was cold.

“That’s right, Yoshino-san!”

As soon as Yumi remembered what had happened last night, her eyes flew open. However, when she looked at the next bed, there was no one there. It had the feeling of a cast-off shell, as the blanket retained an impression of a body that had slept there.

“B... Bathroom?”

But the sheets had no bodily warmth. Yumi thrust her hand into the impression to confirm. Some time had passed since she had snuck out of bed. At least about five minutes it seemed.

“W, wh...” She spat out, as she immediately she got a bad feeling. What if, during the time she had crashed, Yoshino had collapsed, unconscious? She stumbled over to in front of the bathroom and opened the door. And then...

“...!” Was the key inside?

“Yoshino-san!?”

If she had gone into the bathroom feeling unwell, she would not have taken the key inside. Unless there was a rule in the Shimazu household like that?

“Yoshino-san, jeez, are you okay?”

Bang, bang, bang, she struck the door. There was no answer. Her breath catching in her throat, she wouldn’t be able to recover from this. If it was like that, whatever Yoshino-san asked she probably should have trusted the teacher last night.

“What should I do.”

As she decided to call for help she moved away from the door, as she turned she noticed it.

Where the curtains met there was a slight light.

(Huh?)

The sound of rain still continued. That could be heard coming from the inside of the bathroom.

“Y, Yoshino-san?”

When her ears began to absorb it properly, she could hear it mixed with the sound of humming.

No way.

Yumi stood in front of the door. Whereupon the sound of rain stopped and the door opened.

“Sorry, Yumi-san. Did you need the toilet?”

“--”

From inside, wearing a bathrobe came Yoshino-san, her hair soaking wet. Her mouth opening and closing Yumi shook her head back and forth.

“Oh? Then, if it’s okay I’m going to dry my hair.” So saying, Yoshino-san turned around and went back into the bathroom, while Yumi squatted where she stood. She didn’t believe it. Just a few hours ago her condition had been so bad, and now, there Yoshino-san was: All better as if nothing had happened, taking a shower.

A glance at her wristwatch told her that it was 6:30 AM. She had the fuzzy feeling of wanting to return to bed, but she couldn’t settle down.

(Worrying has put me at a disadvantage.)

It wasn’t that she was saying that her relationship with a friend was the disadvantage. It was her own view of last night.

(I’m up thirty minutes earlier than planned.)

If Yoshino-san's physical condition was good, then maybe everything was turning in a good direction for her 17th year; very quickly she wouldn't be Fukuzawa Yumi, but a sage. Going through Lillian, one probably would find lessons about Jesus-sama indispensable.

"Ah -, that was refreshing, Thanks for waiting, Yumi-san." Yoshino-san came out of the bathroom in good spirits; Yumi was driven to voice a word of complaint.

"Um, uh."

At which Yoshino-san considered and was already answering, "Didn't I tell you that it was always like that, that if my forehead was cooled off and I slept I'd get better."

"I heard you, but." But, I was still worried, wasn't I. That's normal.

"Before I took my shower, I took your school uniform out of the bathroom and hung it in the closet so it wouldn't get damp."

As she spoke, Yoshino-san opened the curtains and turned on the television. Of course, the newscaster was speaking fluently in Italian. Not to Yumi, but to the screen, Yoshino-san said, "You were worried, huh? You're the only classmate I'll show weakness in front of."

When such a killing expression is said, one's feeling probably will be "It's fine."

It's fine.

She could understand a bit, Rei-sama's feeling that Yoshino-san wielded herself.

Yumi also spoke, not to Yoshino-san, but to the television.

"I was really worried."

When the television news informed them two minutes later that it was seven o'clock, the room phone rang.

Part 2.

At seven-twenty, when they arrived at the dining room, they found that most of their class had already been seated and had begun their meal.

“Yumi-san, Yoshino-san, here.”

In the dining room, Tsutako-san and Mami-san waved their hands. Like “We’ve got you two empty seats”.

“Good day.” Offering a greeting, Yoshino-san took a seat. Then a waiter-like man came by and inquired what the two of them would like. They could only catch the beginning “Bon giorno,” but it was obviously some kind of greeting, so they responded with “bon giorno” too.

“What would you like to drink is what he said.” Tsutako-san instructed. This time, breakfast was buffet style so, one ordered a drink first, it looked like. In any case, what great power of hearing. When the words were spoken so quickly like that, Yumi couldn’t understand a thing.

“We didn’t understand him either. But the teacher from the first-seating Wisteria class told me. Hey, what are you going to have?”

“What?” There wasn’t any menu, even if she said that. As she thought that, Yoshino-san ordered without hesitation.

“Caffé au Lait, please.”

However, the waiter inclined his head sideways.

“Tsutako-san, what’s in your cup?” Yumi asked.

“Caffé Latte.”

“Then, I’ll have that too. Caffé Latte, please.”

Yoshino-san continued. “Me too.”

The time for ordering passed properly. If you thought about it, Caffé au Lait was a French drink.

Tsutako-san and Mami-san met each other’s glance and smiled. Obviously, those two had heard earlier from the Wisteria group teacher about caffè latte. No one was that smart from the beginning.

When she returned to her seat with bacon and eggs and a croissant sprinkled with sugar on her plate, the caffè latte had been placed at her seat. Because she didn't think there were enough vegetables, Yoshino-san poured a glass of tomato juice and brought it back.

"Can you drink this?" Because of what had happened last night, the service was unexpectedly good. "Well? I owe you from last night."

Pouring the caffè latte into her own cup, Mami-san changed the subject. Since she didn't have her usual memo pad for taking notes, this was just a normal conversation.

"The shower isn't easy to use, huh."

"Ah -, how does the toilet even drain?"

It seems that, after Mami-san had used the toilet, she had called Tsutako-san in to the room for consultation. Certainly Yumi too had been lost at first, looking for a Japan-style lever. When she had noticed the large square button in the wall (the size of a writing desk drawer) it has left a big impression. This was definitely a different place.

"Speaking of the toilet, don't you think the seat is cold?"

"Yeah. When I went to sit down I was like 'hyah'."

"Hey, so did you not sit down?"

During breakfast, maybe it would be better to cut this subject short.

"Speaking of that, did you bring an alarm clock?"

Last night in a panic, Yumi had arranged for a wake up call. So.

"The television turned on. Right?" Mami-san and Tsutako-san glanced at each other as they spoke.

"Really?"

"It was on the recording, wasn't it? When it becomes time, the television turned itself on."

“...I didn’t notice.” No, wouldn’t have known, because she never thought to turn the TV on last night.

“It’s cool, isn’t it? Because of that, we’ve had a valuable experience.”

The other two had finished their breakfast earlier, so with a wave of their hands, they left their seat. Those who had come afterwards came later, searching for a seat.

“Is this okay?” From their own Pine class, it was Michiyo-san and Itsue-san. Little by little they were beginning to see the faces of students from Sakura class.

“Sure, go ahead.” Yumi and Yoshino-san greeted the two with bright smiles. The waiter came over greeting the new customers with “Bon giorno”.

“He’s asking you what you want to drink.” But where they had learned that, they did not say.

Part 3.

Coming out to the first floor foyer at eight-thirty, they got on to the waiting bus, once inside they said a brief prayer and took their seats.

Today they had a single guide for their classes, to show them around. She was riding on the Pine class's bus, a Japanese woman old enough to be their mother, who had come to Italy with her husband who worked there, about seven years earlier.

"From here, we're going to go to the Vatican City. First we'll go to the art museum. After that, we'll investigate Saint Peter's Basilica. Everybody's feeling well?"

"Ye-es." Foremost, answering with a voice louder than anyone's, was Yoshino-san. Like a kindergartner who wanted something, she raised her hand.

"...What. You're not going to tell the guide about last night are you?"

Even though she hadn't said anything, Yumi could feel the weight of her gaze from the seat next to hers, where Yoshino-san felt the sudden need to make an excuse.

"Anyway, I'm in the best shape now."

"Is that so."

A small peace sign. Well, better that she decide that her health and mood are good rather than bad. That wasn't limited to Yoshino-san.

"Before I forget, I have a few matters to communicate. Regarding using some of the things in your room, I have two or three things I'd like to call to your attention and explain." Checking her memo, the teacher began to talk. A kind of homeroom.

"The alarm clock is attached to the television. If you're not confident about how to work it, you can push the Reception button on the telephone and request a wake-up call."

As she thought, there might have been reports of students who were troubled because they didn't understand. Although she didn't know who her comrades were she looked around with a happy feeling.

"The cord hanging over the bathtub is not the ventilation switch. It is an emergency call cord, so do not pull it excessively."

At these words from the teacher, about half the students laughed, while the remaining half went pale.

Though it was uncertain how many cases there were where hotel employees had come running, but at least about half of them were from students wondering "what is this?" and giving it a quick pull, she guessed. That's the kind of thing Yumi might say. Then give it a pull with some force to see what happened, but give up when nothing did. Once it was resolved, the heart would calm down. However, in the case of a real emergency it would be pulled with great force, maybe. But a question remained.

"To flush the toilet, press the large button on the wall... So, that should take care of everything, right?"

This time everyone smiled. There was no one who wasn't able to flush, it seemed.

When the teacher's admonitions came to a finish, the bus stopped and the door opened. They had only been riding about ten minutes, so she thought they had arrived quickly.

"Are we really there?"

Looking out the window, it didn't seem that there were any buildings. The atmosphere was a lot like that in front of a train station.

"Okay, everyone. Please take down your bags. Because, this bus is going to return to the hotel to pick up the Cherry Blossom class, right. After getting off, please form two lines in front of me."

The guide briskly pointed out directions. They were told that the entrance to the art museum was directly ahead but, that the end of the line to get in would be back where the bus was stopped. If they wanted to go in again, they could go back to the end of the line, but it would waste both time and energy. That the line was stretched out pretty far might have been a technique by the guide, who lived locally.

With the guide bearing the Pine class flag in the lead, and in the very last place was the teacher; framed by the two adults, they lined up in a long snaking line. Looking forward and back restlessly, she could see many types of people. As expected of the Rome to which all roads led, tourists from all over the world gathered here. A little ahead, she could see the Wisteria class, which had left the hotel a little earlier. Because of the school uniforms, they looked black overall, so they were remarkable. Outside school, a gathering of school uniforms stood out. Therefore, for the school-sponsored field trip, they wore school uniforms. If a student was in a situation like an accident or trouble, because they stood out, the teachers could respond quickly.

“That bus ride was really short, wasn’t it?” Yoshino-san muttered.

The line was slow, but it advanced steadily. From the main street, it became a little narrower, and fashionable bars and apartments appeared; Yumi’s wasn’t unhappy at all with her progress, as she could look at these.

“This country, it’s so loose.” The voice, lined up just behind her, was Mami-san’s.

“Loose?” Yumi repeated.

“Like in the rules, or morals or environmental problems, those kind of things,” Mami-san said, as if taking notes. “For instance, the streets are dirty.”

It was true that cigarette butts and paper garbage and plastic had definitely fallen about. Tokyo streets weren't beautiful, but they had more conservative amounts of garbage than she noticed here.

"Yeah, it seems to be a smoker's heaven, huh, this country." Tsutako-san, who was next to Mami-san, added.

Now, everywhere one went in the world, one hunched away from smokers. In the hotel lobby, at café tables, on the street, everyone openly smoked.

"And the traffic laws, too."

Pedestrians crossed at places where there were no traffic lights. When the traffic paused, or not, they walked normally. Drivers who had become accustomed to it, skillfully applied their brake quickly to avoid the pedestrians.

"But, no one is denying that."

There was no mistaking, it was as Mami-san said. Tsutako-san nodded hugely.

"Leisurely, big-hearted, you could call it generous. Hey, look."

They looked where she gestured with her chin, at an old man who sat by the roadside; in front of the old man sat a can into which people placed money.

"That's...?"

"My wealth, which is split into portions for others. In Japan, this scenery doesn't greet one's eyes much."

After all, Tsutako-san muttered, is this is a Christian country.

Benevolence should produce a charitable culture. Another public rule that was followed loosely in this culture.

Which way was better, or not as bad. You could call it national character. Just, being surprised at foreign culture was rude. It certainly seemed so.

Whatever they said, it was they who were the tourists. They wouldn't be allowed to interfere in too much in this country.

"It's okay. We'll see a lot of things here."

That's what this trip was for, Yumi thought. Until now, they hadn't gained wisdom about the world.

First off, they had to be receptive. That was a difficult thing but the absolute most important thing, she thought.

"Many things?" Yoshino-san repeated. Like, what kind of things, exactly.

"Many things, like I said, many things."

Right, as in---

As Yumi was about to respond, a horn sounded. As the students heard it, a little 'Ah!' of delight went up.

"It's a marriage ceremony." Coming up from behind, beeping, was an open car, with a bride in her wedding dress and a groom in a white tuxedo riding in it.

"Ah, that's right. It's Saturday, isn't it?"

The new bride and groom's car was surrounded by friends and young people, cheering and bantering, the whole had a feeling of excitement.

"That's nice, isn't it."

The girl's high school students saw the whole hubbub off with melting eyes.

Shortly afterward came a dog owner pulling a Dalmatian on a rope against its will, excrement pouring down its legs as it ran.

"...Yup, loose." Mami-san said, disgusted. It appeared that the dog's stomach did not feel well, so it came out; so loose was, in fact, suitable.

Part 4.

After being in line for fifteen minutes, they reached the entrance of the art museum.

Although it was called an art museum, it had actually absorbed pretty much everything, Yumi realized, about ten minutes after entering.

At the outset, she looked at everything with spirit, but as the next item and the next appeared extending on, it exceeded a single person's capacity for storage. If she didn't want to push the memory of the last painting out of her head, she wouldn't be able to put a new one in. Eventually, the effort of replacement would falter. She apologized to each and every splendid religious painting, and to Maria-sama.

"That's fine," Maki-sensei said. "Even if you look at the paintings absent-mindedly, then you can have favorites. In the museum there will be one or two points, where you might see a picture you like and think, 'Aha.' Otherwise your eyes are attempting to do too much, right."

"Even though I will attempt to explain every important point, it's fine if you please think of my voice as background music. When there is a painting that interests you, you can give me your attention."

When the guide said this, suddenly the mood relaxed. Even if one had a deep expertise in fine art, this was a place that would fill one's stomach with paintings.

And Yumi, at the Vatican museum was able to think "Aha" at the painting, Michelangelo's "Last Judgment". On the upper center of the large wall of the church was Christ in judgment, placed next to him was the Virgin Mary, and around him were composed the many humans being judged, this all too famous wall mural. In a single phrase, it was Heaven and Hell.

Although it was a famous painting, it drew her to it, although you might be able to say that the other way around; that it was because it appealed to people so much that it was a famous painting, probably.

Partly because of the size, it had terrible power.

Overcome with amazement she viewed it, at some point she did not know, Shimako-san stood next to her. No, although the Wisteria class had already departed, Yumi understood that Shimako-san had walked over to stand by her side, looking up at the mural.

Meeting there was a cool accident. Yumi greeted her with “Gokigenyou.” But, when she looked at her friend’s face, she got a shock.

“—Eh?”

Shimako-san had tears streaming down her face.

“Sh... Shimako-san?”

“Why is it I wonder, that the tears won’t stop.” Great tears dropped onto her cheeks where they glittered and shone.

Were those the tears of a person filled with compassion for those being judged? Or were they the tears of the holy mother who cast down her eyes at Christ’s despair at having to judge?

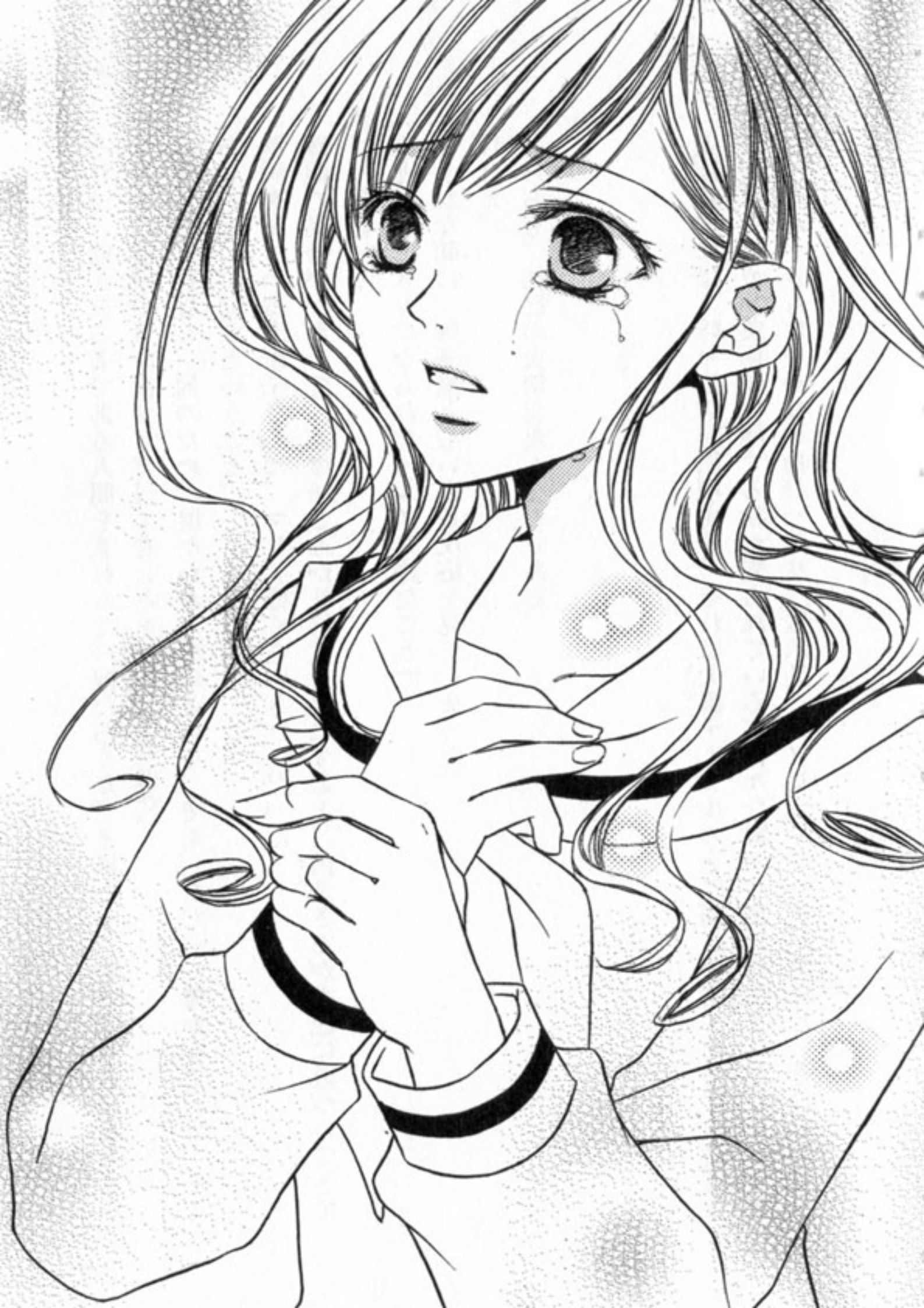
Shimako-san herself did not understand what her tears were it seemed. But it certainly seemed that whatever it was, was faith.

Shimako-san, looking at that religious painting, was as lovely as Maria-sama.

When Shimako-san left that place of worship behind to join up with the rest of Wisteria class, Yoshino-san approached Yumi and whispered dryly, “Jesus-sama looks like he’s gotten a little fat, somehow.”

During this time, she was able to see reactions in two extremes
However.

Of everyone, these were Yumi’s most important friends.



Part 5.

From time to time, inside the art museum, a store would appear. They were mostly of the simple, items lined up on a large table kind. Selling Vatican Museum-related goods. Guidebooks translated into various languages, gorgeous small items, replicas and miniatures of items on display, varying according to the shop.

“Yoshino-san, what are you doing?”

In front of a store in the middle of a wide hallway, Yoshino-san wasn't moving. Trying to see what was notable, she looked around her. And, those were.

“Rosaries...”

Yoshino-san was looking quite seriously at the rosaries all lined up on the table, on the side of the rosary no icon of Maria-sama could be seen.

“Really, it makes my stomach clench.”

Probably, she was thinking about her future *sœur* plans. The decision to make someone her *sœur* was coming closer and closer, so seeing those probably brought it to mind.

“Are you going to buy a new one?”

“No. Shimako-san gave Noriko-chan the one she had gotten from Sei-sama.”

Because Sei-sama had also received it from her *onee-sama*, that same rosary had continued for who knows how many ages.

“As for me, Rei-chan went out and bought one for me.”

Therefore Rei-sama was still carrying the one Eriko-sama had given her even now.

Whether the rosaries transferred for sister's pledges were handed down time and time again or newly bought, didn't really matter. And “from generation to generation” could have its own restrictions and inconvenience.

“How about Yumi-san's rosary? Did Sachiko-sama hand over the one she got from Yōko-sama, I wonder?”

“I don’t know.” She had never thought to ask. “At the least, it wasn’t originally prepared for me, after all.” Before that day of the sudden *sœur* proclamation, she had exchanged a few words with Sachiko-sama. As a result, Yumi hadn’t accepted it. Now Yumi, who had hung her neck for it, would soon be the one to give the rosary.

“That’s right. Before Yumi-san, Sachiko-sama had made overtures to Shimako-san.”

Sometimes what you don’t desire is okay, Yoshino-san muttered. If she was thinking of buying one for her future *sœur*, obviously Shimako-san’s situation came to mind... It was a little complicated.

“Hey, aren’t you going to buy one?”

“So you intend on dragging your companion into this?”

More importantly, I just thought of something cool. Rosary divination.”

“What is that?”

“Because they are here, I’m inspired to buy one. Therefore, when I get home, I’ll find the best possible first-year in the school to make my *sœur*. What do you think?”

“What do I think?” In Cinderella, the princess was not chosen by the size of her shoes. To make matters worse, just because you said a fortune, that doesn’t mean it was foretold.

“Stop it.” Yumi said, as she moved away from the table.

Putting the rosary divination aside, she didn’t feel like choosing between all the rosaries lined up. More than lots of colored stones strung together, she preferred something simpler.

Anyway, she was maintaining the status quo.

Part 6.

After the Vatican Museum, came St. Peter's Basilica.

This was the Catholic head church. The place the Pope comes from. Supposedly erected above the grave of the martyr St. Peter.

They lined up and waited at the entrance to the plaza. It was filled with the same kinds and number of tourists as the art museum. Just in front of the few dozen of the second-year Pine class were a group of western looking middle aged men, and in front of them, an Asian couple, being refused entry.

One of the middle-aged gentlemen was wearing shorts, sandals and old socks, while the woman from the couple, was wearing a thin spaghetti-strap dress that showed too much skin, their guide explained. This was a holy place, therefore suitable clothes must be worn and a suitable pace must be used, or one would not be allowed to enter.

The woman from the couple put on a man's shirt to conceal her skin, and was allowed to enter, but there was no instant improvisation to cover the short pants. The middle aged man shrugged and turned away.

"Those people, I wonder if they were Christians." Watching them go by, Mami-san muttered from behind.

"Regardless of what faith a person is themselves, they should recognize what a suitable appearance is for a holy place." Yoshino-san laid out the final blow. A sound argument, but it seemed a fairly harsh opinion.

"Then, isn't it a bit dangerous to be Japanese? It's said that there are very few people who live habitually steady and pious lives." Even as Yumi thought it, the words came from Tsutako-san's mouth.

"I think us Japanese will be all right."

"Why?"

"We bought a guidebook in preparation, didn't we? It says right in it to be careful to bring suitable clothing."

Mami-san and Yoshino-san were seen to nod hugely, so it seemed likely those three must have read every nook and corner of the guidebook in preparation.

“Speaking of that, I wonder if you need your passport to enter,” Mami-san said, as if in passing.

“Passport?”

“Vatican City is literally its own country.”

Right, right, the world’s smallest independent state.

“So, it’s not Italy inside, then.”

“Well, I guess not if you put it that way.”

“But if that’s the case, how about when we entered the Art Museum? They didn’t look at our passports then, right? But is that actually a part of Vatican City?” It was called the Vatican Museum, so maybe it was.

“If it’s not part of Italy, does the Pope rule over it?”

“Even though it’s Vatican City, the Swiss protect it. Come on, let’s go.”

For a little while after the people were caught and not allowed in because of their clothes, entrance had been delayed, but eventually it was Yumi and the others’ turn.

Ah, she now saw, as soon as the school uniforms in the lead were seen, there was no stopping those lined up afterward, so they flowed by smoothly.

They did not need to present their passport, as they entered into St. Peter’s Square. As she passed by the official in charge who stood at the entrance, she was as nervous as she had been during the hand luggage inspection before boarding the airplane. Of course the Lillian Girl’s School uniform would not have to be shed for not being suitable, but.

Her first impression of St. Peter’s square was “It’s like an outdoor stage.” Or, to be accurate, ‘Assembly Hall concert seating’ she guessed. There were an enormous number of chairs facing the temple.

“This is in preparation for tomorrow,” the guide explained.

For tomorrow’s Sunday mass, believers from all over the world would gather. Participating in a mass at the headquarters of the Catholic Church would probably be a lifelong dream for some believers.

Not only was the outside of the Cathedral impressive, the inside left them dumbstruck.

First of all, the ceiling was incredibly high. And dazzling. Beautiful. Gorgeous. Impressive. Brilliant. Anyway, the only word that was fitting was “wonderful” for the gorgeous things they had seen at the art museum; this simply left these mere Japanese high school girls standing there with their mouths gaping wide open.

The world is big. They had never seen such a building.

As they stood there gaping, the guide lead the way so they could see Michelangelo’s statue “Pieta” and “St. Peter.” That such famous statues were here also, left Yumi with a considerable case of culture shock.

Part 7.

After having been half dazzled out of their minds by St. Peter's, they walked for a while, while their wits returned to them, and they whispered about their impressions and feelings.

"I'm hungry."

Glancing at her wristwatch, it was almost 2 in the afternoon. In both museum and church there had been stairs, and coupled with the time, it wasn't all that surprising. Moreover, they'd been moving at a fair pace. If one took one's time visiting, it would take more than one day.

"Just wait a little longer." Like baby birds crying out for their parents to feed them, "I'm hungry" could be heard up and down the line. In a case like this, the need to pay attention to their stomachs being empty would obliterate any other thoughts for the students.

When they arrived at an open café (or something like that) where they had a reservation, the young women all left with a panini, which was delicious, as they walked.

Italian mineral water was carbonated. So, if they wanted regular water, they had to request it "without gas" or they wouldn't get it.

Yumi and the others who sat around the table in a friendly fashion, consulted and found that about half had asked for that. Although novel at first, they all took "with gas", now they all reached for "without gas" when the meal was over. As expected, people went back to what they were familiar with as children. The people who thought it was great, this "with gas," would consider buying it for when they returned home to Japan. But, Italian water as a souvenir. Maybe that would be a bit too heavy.

Anyway. Yumi's challenge today, the restroom in the store, had been vanquished.

Thinking there would be a little old lady who cleaned the toilets, she took some small change and entered the store.

According to the guidebook, in Italian, toilets were called “banyo”, women were “donna”. Because the toilets were locked from the outside, she had to go to the counter to borrow the key.

While muttering to remind herself of it all, she left the guest seating, going around the corner until she reached the stairs. In front of the stairs there was a piece of paper affixed to the wall, with an arrow pointing down and the word “Toilette” written on it. This store apparently had the bathroom in the basement. Yumi turned towards the gloomy basement, and slowly went down the stairs.

“--was it. What was it like? Give me the simple, concise report.”

When Yumi had finished in the bathroom, she was importuned by an irritated Yoshino for the first use of the banyo report.

“In other words, the bathroom is in the basement, right? So, did you need money?”

“Not needed.”

“Was there paper?”

“There was.”

“Right. That’s all I need to hear. Thank you for the report.”

“Ah, Yoshino-san.” By the time she called out for her to stop and hear the second part of the first use of the banyo report, she had already disappeared into the store. Probably under pressure of necessity. That couldn’t be helped. However.

“...There isn’t any toilet seat. Why didn’t you tell me that?” When she returned, Yumi was sure she’d start right off with that complaint. Therefore Yumi thought, “Don’t you think that that kind of toilet is perfect for training the muscles in your legs?” Was her only answer. But when she returned, this is what she said:

“It’s more a sense of equilibrium, than muscle, isn’t it?”

Apparently Yoshino-san, had gotten on the western-style toilet without hovering.

That was a completely different kind of problem.

Part 8.

After their late lunch came sightseeing at San Angelo castle. The bus brought them back to the hotel, where they were free to move outside their class units.

As a result of their previous consultation in homeroom, Yumi and the others had decided to stroll to the Piazza di Spagna and the Trevi fountain this evening. In the same way, they had decided that tomorrow for their free time, they would visit Via delle Carrozze and fit the **Mouth of Truth** into their schedule. In other words, the Pine Class' theme was "Roman Holiday."

"You know, it feels like it's overflowing with people, somehow."

At the famous Spanish Steps, many people crowded each other. They weren't doing anything particular, just trying to find a seat somewhere, pull out food from somewhere, pretending they were Princess Anne eating gelato.

"What's fun about sitting on steps?" Grumbled those people who couldn't get a seat. Laughing at the people following the fad. But after all, one came all the way here, so there will be no punishment if one sat. --So, the various members of Pine Class all found a place to sit down on the steps. At which, Tsutako-san quickly took a picture. Because the "Old guy next to them" interfered, they grumbled about that, too.

"Yumi-san, what are you thinking about?"

"Eh?"

"Every once in a while you sigh like you're thinking. Today... Yeah, since after noon," Tsutako-san spoke over the camera lens. As expected of the Camera Club's ace, she really saw people's faces. "Hm, are you homesick? Or is it that you can't see onee-sama?"

"No, that's not it at all." Yumi denied it, waving both hand and head back and forth. Not even a day and a half had passed since they had left Japan.

If it were a weekend like always, and she wouldn't be able to see Onee-sama., then it would just be the usual long rest she'd experienced many times since they'd become sœur.

"Then what?" Tsutako-san smiled, lowered the camera, and sat by Yumi's side. Yoshino-san and Mami-san, having sat on the steps, seemed satisfied, and were now looking at the dark water. As they rolled up their sleeves and put their arms in, the water bubbled up over them.

"Before, when we went to San Angelo, wasn't it." Yumi confessed to Tsutako-san.

"Ah, when they told us about the play 'Tosca', that castle?"

"In the opera 'Tosca,' in order to save his lover, he committed murder, and in recompense the woman he loved was shot dead; whereupon he jumped to his death off the terrace, committing suicide.

To put it simply.

"That was it. When I heard about the opera, thoughts of Kanina Shizuka-sama were planted in my mind.

"Rosa Canina, huh?"

Previously, Shimako-san had competed for the position of Rosa Gigantea with the singer. A person who, before she had gone on to be a third-year, had traveled to Italy in order to study music.

"I wonder why. Is she doing well, you mean."

Now that she stood on the earth of Italy, it seemed obvious but, it was big, and there were a lot of people. Shizuka-san was probably somewhere under this big sky but she didn't know the address of where she was living, or even the name of the town and, it was unlikely that, as students passed along the streets on a field trip, they might suddenly find someone they wanted to meet, she thought.

"And that's got you down? You're saying that you have no evidence to depend on that she's happy?" As Tsutako-san spoke, from behind Mami-san appeared and said, "Speaking of dependence."

"You surprised me. When did you come back?"

“Just now. I saw that there was a nice mood here between Tsutako-san and Yumi-san, having a secret conversation, and I wanted to listen in.”

“It’s nothing, it wasn’t a secret conversation. So, ‘Speaking of depending’ what?”

“Ah, right, right. Did you know? At the post office inside the Vatican City Art museum, one of the Sakura class students addressed and sent postcards addressed to Japan.”

“To her family?”

“Uhn-uhn. To her onee-sama and imouto.”

Upon hearing onee-sama, Yumi suddenly became jealous. It wasn’t that she was homesick and it wasn’t that she had no patience with not being able to see Onee-sama, but when else would she have the chance to send a postcard to onee-sama from abroad, she didn’t know. Because now that she was thinking about it, it was Saturday evening. She didn’t know the post office hours in this country, but even if she saw a mailbox, she couldn’t buy a stamp.

“Well, let’s go to Trevi, Pine Class - “ At the teacher’s orders, they stood up and smoothed their skirts. Just because they were called travelers, didn’t mean they could move about freely.

Part 9.

Maki-sensei said she really liked the way the Trevi Fountain looked at night. Because of that, the Pine Class had added the Trevi Fountain to their Saturday night schedule.

Fifty years had passed since the masterpiece movie “Roman Holiday” but it was still popular with girls, so this wasn’t limited to the Pine Class; the Wisteria and Sakura classes had also planned it. But only the Pine Class were able to see the evening light show at the Trevi Fountain. The other two groups were coming tomorrow at mid-day. Probably because of the story of Princess Anne in the middle, they wanted to see it while it was light out.

As the teacher had said, Trevi Fountain at night was beautiful. The lights made the many beautiful white statues appear to float in the middle of the darkness. At their feet, black water poured out. Although it was actually an outer wall of the Palazzo Poli, for a building wall, it was excessively artistic.

Turn around and throw a coin behind you into the fountain. If you do that, then some day you will return to this place, or so the story goes.

Yumi too took a coin out of her purse, and with a “yay” did it. Since she was facing away, she wasn’t sure if she threw the coin into the fountain and it would be too bad if it landed elsewhere.

“Takeshima-san, if you’d like to have one taken, why not line up with Fukuzawa-san and the others? I’ll take the picture.” Maki-sensei reached out, but Tsutako-san replied “Don’t worry about it,” diffidently. She much preferred to take pictures than to have them taken of her.

“Sensei, you’re not going to throw one in?”

“No. Because even if I don’t throw a coin in, I come here often. If I throw a coin, I’m just losing money, right?”

Because she came here often, she had been able to say “I like Trevi at night.” Those were the words of someone who knew the Trevi Fountain at night and in the day.

“Sensei, in your time, did you come to Italy?”

“No. It was just Kyushu then.”

Maki-sensei was a Lillian OG. However many years ago that was, they still weren’t going overseas for the class trip, it seemed.

“Since I was a second-year homeroom teacher last year and this year, I’ve come to Italy two years in succession.”

She didn’t know what would happen next year, but if she was still a teacher at Lillian, she would be traveling to Italy who knows how many times, Maki-sensei said.

“Sensei, do you like being a teacher at Lillian?”

“Mm. Yes, I like it.”

“Then, it’s okay if you throw a coin. Like saying that you’ll be coming back. Because in order to come on the class trip, you’ll have to stay a Lillian teacher.”

“Or, I could ask to come back on a personal tour.” Muttering this, Sensei took a coin out and threw it.

It flew in a particularly large arc, the lights reflecting brightly off of it, and fell into the middle of the fountain.

Part 10.

“This is unconfirmed information, but,” Mami-san whispered, as they sat for dinner.

They were talking in the restaurant next to the hotel. Polcini was roasted mushrooms stuffed in the mouth of a whole fish that was carried to the table on a plate.

“One of the Sakura class students told me a little while ago. Ah, but this conversation is off record, okay. Because I’m thinking of putting it in the Lillian Kwaraban.”

However, if one of the Sakura class students had been the one to procure it, then the news wasn’t really a scoop, right. More importantly, before publishing it, she was the one spreading the rumor. However Mami-san continued without caring. After all, even though they were in the middle of a stay in Italy, Mami-san’s reporter’s spirit couldn’t totally loosen up, probably.

“Do you know where Sakura class went last night?”

“Wasn’t it for a walk in Borghese Park?” Yoshino-san answered, flipping her hair back. The feeling was, hurry up and say it already.

“Right, and while they were there was an incident.”

“One of the students got lost. So you all know that story. It’s kind of pathetic though, and not a scoop,” Tsutako-san pointed out, and Yumi nodded in agreement.

The result was that the girl wandered around the park crying, until she ran into a kind, local, older couple who led her back to where her classmates were. When they had returned from the Trevi Fountain, they were told this by some of the Wisteria class students in the lobby. Mami-san must not have heard that information at that time.

“I went to the student’s room to ask her for an interview.”

“...That’s a nice answer.”

“She spoke to me on condition of anonymity. Therefore, let’s call her A-san, shall we?”

When Cherry Blossom class arrived at the Borghese Park, they were given permission to break into several small groups to move around conditionally. In the beginning A-san, with naturally, the seven other people in her group, walked around the park with a map in hand. They took pictures next to the splendid statuary, took pictures of a local young man who waved at them from among the many people riding bicycles around, it all seemed to be plenty of fun.

“But then, why did A-san get lost?”

“There,” Mami-san whispered. “She saw something that caught her attention, and she ended up being separated from the group, then wandering around aimlessly. The time they were getting back together was near, she had to be going back soon, it felt like that time, and the group didn’t really seem to notice that they were one person down. It was getting dark and as they were all moving together, so they didn’t do an individual roll call in the group.”

“So, what was the thing? Really, Mami-san, you’re always talking like you’re the one who did it. Nice personality.”

Although she spoke the words hatefully, it was obvious that Yoshino-san was irritated because she wanted to know what happened. Mami-san seemed to understand this, maybe because it was a pattern she had encountered from working on the Lillian Kawaraban.

In the middle of students chatting energetically about Vatican at noon, or Trevi at night, this table alone had faces that appeared to be meeting in a confidential conversation, speaking in soft voices. She wondered if none of their classmates noticed; Yumi seemed anxious, and the others appeared to be in a daze, it really was a wonder that no one seemed to notice them at all.

Still, Mami-san dropped her voice a little lower and said, “She said that she saw Satō Sei-sama.”

---Just so.

The Mouth of Truth's Complaint

Part 1.

Rome's subway was a choice of two lines, A and B.

It was simple therefore, not at all like the map of the Tokyo underground which, the longer you look at it, the less you understand, or so it seemed.

But still, it was foreign ground. It was still a big job to buy a single ticket if one did not understand on one's own.

Each class was free to move about as they pleased. Today's planned site was the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, the Coliseum and the Mouth of Truth. At their previous meeting everyone had decided to buy a ticket, "Because this is a good chance to take the subway" but in reality it was a pretty big obstacle.

Anyway, it was pretty crowded. Today was Sunday.

Thirty people boarding the same train would be impossible, so they split into three groups, confirmed the station name where they would get off many times, and roll-call would be done again as they passed the exit of the platform.

Once they had confirmed that they were all gathered they moved on. In front of the station exit the roll was called. As soon as they had exited, roll was called. It was like this throughout. Since yesterday's Sakura class situation, the teachers were exceedingly nervous.

When the word went out that they would be taking the subway, the teachers' expressions clearly said, "That will be troublesome," which was now understandable. Nevertheless, Maki-sensei had obviously decided that if it would not be dangerous for the students, they would do it. Moreover, it was the high school policy.

Taking the A line which ran next to the hotel, they first went to the terminal. This was an intersection with the B line, where the international lines and the domestic lines of the national railway intersected. It was a very large Roman station.

A five-minute walk from the Terminal was the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore. This was a church built on instructions from Maria-sama. By coincidence, today was a cloudless, fine day. It brought Maria-sama's heart to mind, under the bright blue sky, as the bright white building known as "Saint Maria of the Snow" glittered brightly.

They entered the church, right in the middle of the Sunday mass. By the simple means of a rope strung across the central part of the large church, chairs for the clergy and believers were lined up inside the church where they offered up their prayers. Although the words of the sermon and the prayers differed, masses held at Lillian came in many parts. As students who attended a Christian school, Yumi and the others behind the congregation, put their hands together and prayed.

Returning to the terminal, this time they took line B to the Coliseum. Shortly after getting off at the station, the famous round stadium appeared. In truth, they had discussed the pros and cons of taking the sightseeing tour or not in homeroom.

Some insisted upon their theme, "Let's see many of the places that Princess Anne went sightseeing at in 'Roman Holiday' with our own eyes," while the opposing faction said, "We don't want to go to a place where killing people was turned into a show." In the end, they decided to take time to look around the outside only. They got out of the station on this side for the Coliseum and would go on from here to the Mouth of Truth, both sides had agreed.

There were many wires, and good ventilation had been developed in to stone surface, they noticed as they walked leisurely around, until they arrived at an old church.

It was Santa Maria in Cosmedin. This was where the "Mouth of Truth" was, but it in no way stood out. However, when they saw a long line coming out of the church, they could help but nodding and saying "so that's the way it is, is it."

“I was thinking that it would be quiet inside the church...”

“Uhn. They come from far away to see it.”

So conversing, they lined up at the tail end of the line. The head of the line up ahead just as it was about to enter the church, turned to the left, along a long and narrow passageway. That was where the “Mouth of Truth” was. The “Mouth of Truth” was a large disk of marble with the face of the god of the sea, Triton, that had been excavated; the legend said that if a liar put his hand in its mouth, it would be eaten.

It was also said that the disk was a manhole cover from ancient times, which now gathered people like this. Of course, that was probably because of the influence of the famous scene from “Roman Holiday.” As far as Yumi and the others could see, everyone mimicked the reporter Bradley, waving around their uneaten hands without making a noise.

Behind them, many other tourists had lined up who understood, and used discretion when a person’s turn came, they went in alone, took a few pictures of themselves in front of “The Mouth of Truth”, then handed it over to the next person. For that reason, it was their turn much sooner than they thought. Of course, it goes without saying that the students of Lillian complied with this unwritten rule.

Yumi and Yoshino-san thrust their hands into the “Mouth of Truth” at the same time for Tsutako, who had made the request “You two together” on behalf of the Newspaper and Camera clubs. If Shimako-san had been in the same class, no doubt she would have said, “you three.”

After the pictures were taken, they entered the chapel. It was old and dark and small, but the mosaics had such a holy atmosphere that it felt like a church. Most of the tourists that had put their hands in the “Mouth of Truth” had left, satisfied, so there were few people there, but that was sort of sad. Right there, a few steps away, was a splendid chapel.

From the chapel of Santa Maria in Cosmedin they were going to a restaurant for a late lunch, they walked over to nearby Cirulli Massimo station (which on an empty stomach seemed like a long walk), rode the B subway line to the terminal, then took the A line back to the hotel.

Part 2.

“There’s eyewitness testimony about Sei-sama, but...” Mami-san said, holding her pen as if it was chopsticks.

“Not just A-san from Sakura class. There are others.” From the time they returned to their hotel until dinner, Mami-san seemed to have not relaxed in her room at all. She spoke to students who were in the lobby, visited the rooms of acquaintances she had in Sakura and Wisteria classes, gathering information. As her roommate Tsutako-san had spent that time calculating how much film she had remaining and doing camera repair and cleaning, that was just fine with her. They were both the “take the path of your skills” types.

“Others too, you say?” Yoshino-san asked, stuffing her cheeks full of boiled root vegetables. Tonight was the first Japanese food they’d had in a while. Because the love of rice comes on slowly but steadily, in consideration of the school, a Japanese restaurant had been built next door.

When in Rome do as the Romans do... Might be the way of spirit, but the body occasionally wants food without olive oil in it.

They were honestly grateful.

“Students from Wisteria, in the Milan airport, were sure they saw someone that looked like her. When I talked to them about it, they were sure it had been her.”

“At the Milan airport...”

As Yumi heard that, she thought of something that had happened there. Immediately after she had bought the sign marker, something that had come out of the mouths of the students surrounding her, the words “Rosa Gigantea.” It hadn’t been in reference to Shimako-san.

“The same thing happened at Narita.”

“That name was similar wasn’t it.” Mami-san had herself recognized that “Katō” sounded similar to “Satō.” When the three had managed to get a table together, Mami-san continued, “But it can’t be confirmed.”

“The name wasn’t exactly the same, but the face that was seen was.”

“But Shimako-san also...”

“Mm. But she listened to the broadcast and asserted that it said Katō-san. But someone who looks like Sei-sama was sighted by students. Don’t you think that’s a coincidence?”

As a coincidence, it was a bit much. Really, she thought.

“So, Sei-sama is in Italy?” Yoshino-san asked, but Mami-san shook her head back and forth, making a correction.

“In Rome.”

Rome.

The three of them chewed on these words. Sei-sama had come to Rome. Suddenly they had the feeling of “wah-wah-waaannnn.”

“Why here, I wonder.”

“A trip, probably?”

“What about school?”

“That’s right. University is in the middle of exam break.”

Then, it wouldn’t be a problem to schedule it.

“But when Sei-sama was in school, the school field trip must have been Italy. Why would she come back to somewhere she’d already been to only two years ago? Wouldn’t France or England be better? If you’re paying to fly to Europe.”

“That’s true.”

Yoshino’s opinion had strangely persuasive power.

“Then, it’s someone else that looks like...”

“Even if the person told me that it was someone who looked exactly like Sei-sama, and all the other hints that have come in one by one? Sei-sama doesn’t have typical Japanese features, so that wasn’t what was seen.”

“In Narita, Milan, and Borghese Park too? In all of them, someone who looked like her?”

“Uhn-uhn.”

The three crossed their arms and pondered this deeply. And they carried over their cups of Japanese tea, then set them down.

“If it’s really her, any way contact would have to be from her side.”

That’s true, they nodded, and four people lifted their teacups with both hands, and drank.

Dinner was over, but the subject was not concluded.

The situation was that all four wanted to see this “exactly the same” person with their own eyes.

Part 3.

That night, about the time Yumi went to take a bath, Yoshino-san phoned Rei-sama.

Because it was Sunday night about ten o'clock here, it was about six o'clock Monday morning in Japan or so. Rei-sama was probably in the middle of dressing, so she would have time to talk for a while.

It had been decided to make collect calls to Japan from the hotel rooms. This was to keep students from making inevitable phone calls home. If one wanted to hear a *sœur's* voice, it might be impossible, when one realized that the other's house would bear the charge.

In Yoshino-san's case, because her *onee-sama*, Rei-sama, was also her cousin who lived next door, so many things were flexible. If she went ahead and made a collect call to Rei-sama's home to talk to her, her relatives would likely accept the charge.

Yumi got out of the bath feeling anxious, but when she saw Yoshino-san's back, sitting on the bed laughing, she felt a little jealousy in her heart. She wanted to hear Sachiko-sama's voice. She wanted to say stupid things, and be scolded.

Because they had been to many places, and often were hurried, she hadn't had a chance feel lonely. At the end of a day like this, when she felt relaxed, *Onee-sama* became especially beloved.

To take her mind off it, she went to watch TV, but that didn't work. One show was a variety show but because it was in Italian it wasn't much fun.

Some people might call this homesickness, but it was different. If you had to call it something, call it Sister-sickness.

But, even if she called home, it wouldn't solve this loneliness.

She wanted to see her right now. She wanted Sachiko-sama to feel that feeling of wanting to see her, too.

Japan and Italy. Because you could call this “distance on a map” to make it an easily understandable separation, but it’s even more understandable when one comes here and returns to one’s home country on an airplane.

However.

When two people were separated by “circumstance” or “daily life” or “time” it was occasionally necessary to cry once in a while.

She especially didn’t want to think about what would happen after Onee-sama graduated in the middle of her school field trip, but it was a little late to tell herself that now.

Bit by bit, aimlessly, and eventually falling apart, she couldn’t control herself.

Because Yoshino-san didn’t seem like she was ending the call, Yumi quietly returned back inside the opened door.

Retracing her steps into the bathroom, she used the cold water to wash away her tears over and over.

Tomorrow Florence.

If only she could change her feelings.

The Capital Of Flowers Is What Kind Of City?

Part 1.

Monday

At just before eleven they left the terminal station to board the Eurostar to Florence. What they called the Eurostar was a train similar to what in Japan was called the **Shinkansen**.

The ticket gates for the national train and the subway did not differ. You needed a ticket with the embossed seal to ride. If you did not have the embossed seal, a penalty fine would be imposed, there was no way to know, she thought, how many travelers that system caused to drink their tears. As she ate her sandwich for lunch, she gazed out of the window and watched the rural landscape flow by.

There was no green to be seen. Dry earth color. Completely clear sky. Stone buildings. The scenery that appeared and disappeared looked just like the sets for oil paintings. The flower of art may have well opened up in such a beautiful land.

One hour and forty five minutes ride on the Eurostar brought them to Santa Maria Novella Station, in the second place they were staying, Florence.

Florence, the Capital of Flowers, was a small city. Many local bus routes ran within it and since many of the popular sightseeing spots were gathered within 700 meters of the Duomo, if one felt uneasy about those, one could walk around, the guidebook said.

For that reason, from the station to their hotel, naturally, they walked. To avoid the roads crammed with tourists, they went south, walking along the Arno river, until they arrived at the hotel.

Because it was not yet check-in, they left their luggage and took a stroll around the environs of the Duomo. It might be a small city, but there was plenty to see. They wouldn't be able to see everything, but first they could check to see what they might want to do, since tomorrow they would have free time, the teacher said.

The Duomo looked like a little church out of a fairy tale. From behind, it looked like an overdone wedding cake, as they walked around it, it appeared to be a round chocolate powder covered cake.

Well that was what she thought at the time. When she said it, her classmates all giggled at her.

“Yumi-san, are you hungry or something?”

“That’s not it at all. I saw the image of a wild boar a little while ago and didn’t think I wanted to eat it.”

She said.

“Then, when Yumi-san is really hungry, and you see a live cow or pig or chicken, it looks delicious?”

Why this was getting more and more comical. Obviously, that was not true. Although, when she saw a crab at the aquarium, she did think it looked tasty.

“I understand, Yumi-san is in the mood to eat sweets now.”

When this was pointed out, this time she was not going to deny it at all. Why, you ask? Because just then, the wall of the Basilica of San Lorenzo became visible, which looked like the comb of cream on a chiffon tea cake to her.

“But, you know, I think that too, a little.” Yoshino-san whispered dryly.

Yes, yes.

Florence looked like a delicious city made by a cake shop.

Part 2.

When they finished their light sightseeing and checked into the hotel, which differed from the hotel in Rome, with a simple, chic feel.

The exterior and interior had a basic monotone feel, and the uses of glass and silver in most objects gave it a stiff coolness.

“Oh, this time the shower has a hose! Lucky!” Yoshino’s voice came from inside the bathroom, where she had immediately flown.

“Um, but there doesn’t seem to be a toothbrush set here. That’s odd. Right, Yumi-san, did you hear? At the briefing, it had been confirmed that there would be toothbrushes for those students who did not bring them. Most had bought them at Narita, only to notice that they were in the hotel rooms. Because the teachers had predicted that, they were prepared. In a large suitcase, you could put a few of those in, right? Hey, Yumi-san, did you hear?”

Geez, Yoshino-san was bubbling over. When they had arrived at their hotel in Rome, she hadn’t been feeling well, so couldn’t wander around the room exploring. She was the type to do that, by nature. Although, really, Yumi had wanted to do that at the hotel in Rome, too.

“Hey hey hey, did you use the bidet?” Yoshino-san pointed at the low washstand next to the toilet.

“Not once, I couldn’t figure it out,” Yumi answered, overwhelmed by Yoshino-san’s tension.

“I see, couldn’t figure it out.”

“As far as bathrooms go, I like the kind we have in Japan, with the shower.”

“I agree. Afterwards, the bath. I want to wash in a separate place from the tub.”

“Ah, me too.” They came to consensus with applause and laughed at one another.

When in Rome, do as the Romans do.

However, if one lived a long time in a foreign country, one would get accustomed to their ways, but it was something that couldn't be helped if they didn't yet.

Even in this present time, it was like that.

A long time ago, the first Christian missionaries who stepped onto Japanese soil to introduce Christianity, must have felt that strongly, they couldn't help but think.

Part 3.

Their supper that night had volume.

Because it was young women eating, the menu was chosen by assumption, so that the amount placed on one plate was enormous.

There was vegetable soup, something like a bowl of Donburi. A mass of roast beef that landed with a thud. And above that pasta and bread. They might be growing children, but they wouldn't be able to finish eating all this.

"What a waste," more than one student said, when they were done.

A little past their seats, a local-looking older couple ate with even higher volume than the Lillian students menu, and continuously gulped wine.

When she couldn't eat another thing, Yumi thought, "If only Yūki was here." It would probably please him, she thought vaguely.

"Just Yūki-kun wouldn't be enough. Kobayashi-kun, Takeda-kun and Arisu might be unreliable, but we should call Nikko and Gakko-sempai," Yoshino-san said, laughing. If that was the case, there'd surely be nothing left to eat.

"Speaking of Yūki-kun, he's Yumi-san's little brother, right?"

This year's Hanadera Academy Student Council President. When you asked him to come and help out with our school festival this year, what's he doing? Will it be like last year's Prince?

"Prince-huh." Not my little brother, Yumi shook her head back and forth. In the Fukuzawa house, both siblings together had tanuki faces. For him to play the part of a prince, it would have to be a story of the Tanuki Country.

"She means that it's a better part than a prince."

"Yoshino-san." She tried to check Yoshino-san's loose tongue.

"...Right, from the trip until we get home, it's got to be a secret. Sorry."

"Why do you have to stop taking about it. At least one little hint. Come on, it'll be fine, Yumi-san."

“It’s a secret.”

“No way, there’s a love scene between brother and sister?”

“--Stop it.” She was putting more and more into her stomach, but with that, her fork suddenly stopped. A love scene with Yūki? That’s not even funny, it gave her the creeps.

After dinner, cake was brought over so they could eat it. Girl’s extra stomachs for dessert are a wonder.

If Florence is a city made by a bakery, then I guess we should eat it, huh.” What kind of explanation is that.

The city of cake was another image added to tonight. The lump of meat.

From now on, when Yumi saw a large quantity of meat, she would remember Florence.

Resounding! Leaning! Melting!?

Part 1.

Tuesday.

Today's plan was San Marco Museum and Pisa.

Because the museum gets crowded, they left the hotel at eight o'clock in the morning. As they walked along the street where yesterday afternoon there were many people, because it was before the shops opened, their footsteps clattered. Looking up to the sky in the unpopular cold morning, there was a mysterious feeling about halfway to the Doumo. Of course, that might be the difference between a decoration cake and an ice cream cake.

They arrived at the San Marco Art Museum at half past eight. Several groups of tourists were gathered in the vicinity of the library which had just opened, although there was no way to know how long they had been waiting. There was a plain door that she wasn't sure was the entrance. It probably was, as this museum was located in a monastery. As they progressed down the corridor, they could see beautiful inner grounds. Inside, up a flight of stairs, was the place where Angelico's "Annunciation" was.

This fresco was painted directly on the wall and, although it was painted more than 500 years ago, the colors were still beautiful. "The Annunciation" was a theme that had been painted by many painters and continued to be popular, but when Yumi had compared them in an art book, she had liked Angelico's best, she thought. Although the vivid beauty of the color of the angel's wing was wonderful, the pure look of Maria-sama's facial expression as she received the divine message was truly beautiful.

A memory occurred to her, of a kindergarten Christmas play, where they did a Nativity scene. At that time, the Angel had borne lily flowers that had rained down over Maria-sama.

"Do not fear." And so, she was informed that, in her body dwelled the Savior.

To be surprised would be normal. However, Maria-sama was not ordinary, and accepted the unbelievable truth. No, maybe God had chosen her because she was the kind of woman to accept that.

“It’s lovely...” She wanted to stop and stand in front of it the way Shimako-san had stood in front of “The Last Judgment” in the Vatican museum. Because they couldn’t lend this to another museum like a framed oil painting, if one didn’t come here, one couldn’t see this picture. To the contrary, one could see this picture as long as one continued to come here.

“Come on, let’s go, Yumi-san.” Yoshino-san took her hand and pulled to get her to move.

It would be nice, she thought, if she could meet this Maria-sama.

By the way, in that kindergarten play, she played one of the three mages who celebrated Jesus-sama’s birth. She didn’t remember any of her lines.

As they left the outside of the priests’ quarters where they had gazed at the fresco painted there, a large motor coach of tourists arrived.

Part 2.

From Santa Maria Maggiore station they rode the train for about an hour until they arrived at the Pisa central station. As it was about noon, they satisfied their appetite at a fast food place in the station. It was a major hamburger chain, known all through the world, really. In fact there was an ongoing argument against the youth of Japan eating hamburgers and fries. Mm, they were totally being Americanized.

They bought their tickets at the tobacco shop. The ticket was inserted right into the machine and was marked with a “gatchan” noise when getting on. The same as the local railway here.

After eating lunch the time for the train to arrive hadn’t yet come, or maybe the previous bus had just gone, so everyone in the class rode one bus.

The bus was ten minutes of shaking. They arrived in front of the Duomo plaza with the leaning tower. As the second-year Pine class descended from the bus one by one, they cried out.

“Wow! It really is leaning!”

Probably everyone who came here said the same words, albeit in different languages. The tower is leaning. --Just so.

No, the majority of people knew the tower stood diagonally, so this site was always going to be visited. However, actually confirming it with your own eyes, you’re sure to be surprised at the inclination, and the words just came out. Really, it was pretty amazing that it didn’t fall.

“I thought that Pisa was just a tower, but...”

“Yeah. I can see some other buildings. Um, wait a second. There seems to be a Duomo, a baptismal hall and an art museum,” her classmate explained as she drew the guidebook from her bag. Pisa was a maritime kingdom that had been around since the Roman era.

On the lawn at the side of the leaning tower, Maki-sensei stopped the line from advancing, turning to address them over her shoulder.

“So, then, from now for the next three and a half hours, you have free time. As long as you understand to not leave here. If anything happens come back to this area. I’ll be wandering around here. If any of you want to climb the tower, we’ll be meeting at 1:45. So, then, go ahead.” Sensei clapped her hands as a signal, and the second-year Pine class scattered in groups. Right off, Tsutako-san said, “Come this way,” taking the initiative and Yumi and the others went along.

At any rate this was a “sight-seeing area” so they went sight seeing. Along the edge of the street were souvenir stores lined up, with Leaning Tower of Pisa figurines, Leaning Tower of Pisa postcards, Leaning Tower of Pisa T-shirts, Pinocchio puppets that had absolutely nothing to do with the Leaning Tower of Pisa, neckties of art masterpieces, and other junk for sale.

“Do you think they give permission for that?” Yoshino-san laughed, pointing out a t-shirt with a picture of a world-famous mouse mascot holding up the falling tower.

“More importantly, imagine a giant mouse being the only support for a falling tower.” Mami muttered.

“...”

That was a little scary. Not a little, completely scary. It would have to be as large as Godzilla.

“Let me a take picture here,” Tsutako-san called out to stop. “Since I’ve come to Pisa, I think I want to take some stupid photographs. Yumi-san, help me out.”

“Is this okay?” she asked, standing in place, doing a pose. Standing sideways with both hands extended, one leg forward, facing ahead.

“Yes. The title is ‘Rosa Chinensis en bouton, holding up the tower by herself.’”

“That really is stupid,” Mami-san said thrusting herself in from the side.

“Stupid, but it’s fine. Taking pictures that can only be taken in one place can be shiny too. Come on, let’s fine tune that pose and take another one.”

“Oka-y.”

Afterwards, Tsutako-san took Yoshino-san in the same pose, and then one with the title “The Tsubomi hold up the tower.” The one who in the beginning had called this foolishness “stupid” looked a little jealous as they did this, and in the end was the one with the most serious face when she held up the tower.

“If Shimako-san were here, I could get a complete series of “Red - White - Yellow Roses.” ...Too bad.”

A complete series was hardly entrance to the festivities on the final day of the Grand Sumo tournament, but when Yumi had pushed, she had seen that reflected in her eyes.

“Shimako-san is here.” At which the other three, at the same time, said, “Whah?”

“Look, over there.” Yumi pointed over to where a group of people were on the lawn, then went running over.

“Shimako-saaaan,”

“Well, Yumi-san.”

Shimako-san, who had been sitting on the lawn, stood, smiling at Yumi. The two, glad to meet again, exchanged greetings of “Good day.”

“Wisteria class came here too.”

“Yes. You and the others came here after the San Marco museum? We came here first.”

“Is that right.”

For some reason, Yumi dropped her gaze. “I wonder if Shimako-san is alone,” she said and looked around the area.

Just so. Next to her, at her waist, there was a tourist looking up. As the same moment she thought, “Ah, who is that?” the person turned to her and spoke.

“Good day, Yumi-san.”

“Rosa Canina!” The three who had run after Yumi cried out the name before Yumi. It was true, that person was Kanina Shizuka, Rosa Canina.

“Shizuka-sama!? Why...” Yumi squatted down on the lawn, patting Shizuka-sama on the shoulder. It wasn’t a dream, it was the real person. Her hair was considerably longer. The shadow that was now here, had last been seen a half a year ago when Shizuka-sama had been enrolled in Lillian Girls’ School.

“I decided to come and meet you, didn’t I? All of you.”

Well, unless Shizuka-sama lived in this piazza, one couldn’t think that this was just chance.

“In any case, you knew our schedule well.”

“I received some information from a pen pal.”

“Pen pal? Is that, by any chance Sei-sama!?” Yumi, Yoshino-san, Tsutako-san and Mami-san all said and thought. But Shizuka-sama let the name fly from her mouth.

“It’s Shimako-san.”

Shimako-san said, “Yes” and smiled.

“Pen pals!? You two!?”

“Is there anything strange in that?”

“But...”

For her and Sei-sama and Shimako-san, many things had happened at the time of the Student Council elections. Not only that, she had developed a subtle relationship with Sei-sama. More than that, Shizuka-sama had found Shimako-san’s hidden white card during the Newspaper’s Valentine’s Day event, and the two of them had gone out on a half-day date. Anyway, it was a relationship that couldn’t be expressed in a single word.



Therefore, asking “Is it so strange,” there was no way to answer that. Just that it was, a little, that Shimako-san and Shizuka-sama had become friends.

“If you don’t mind?” Mami-san asked, raising her hand. “I’m Yamaguchi Mami from the newspaper. We’ve heard an unconfirmed rumor that Sei-sama has come to Italy. Have you received any information about that?”

When Shizuka-sama heard that, instead of answering, she asked Shimako, “Have you heard anything?”

“No?”

“I haven’t heard anything either. If she has come, it would be nice if she communicated with me. I told her my address and phone number.”

Then it really was empty rumor. Mami-san was obviously disappointed. It would have been great to be able to announce an article with a three shot of Sei-sama, Shizuka-sama and Shimako-san in the Lillian Kwaraban. At the moment she would have to rely on the unconfirmed rumor.

“You three, you just came now didn’t you? Going up the tower?” Shizuka-sama stood, brushing off her skirt.

“Yes... Tentatively.” Her voice dropped. The truth was that Yumi, when they discussed it at school, had raised her hand at being “One of the people going up.” Somehow that had the feeling of a good luck charm. But now, with the real thing in front of her, she was honestly a little frightened. It was a case of “it’s really big” plus “it’s really leaning.”

“What time are you going up?”

“Around two o’clock.”

“Then, there’s time. If it’s all right with you, can we go together to the Baptistery?”

“The truth is, I was waiting for Yumi-san and the others to come, since I haven’t gone in yet.”

Wisteria class's free time went until two and, apparently, Shizuka-sama and Shimako-san had been sitting there talking and waiting a little while for Pine class to arrive.

Looking at her wristwatch, it was about 1:20. They hurried over to buy tickets and headed to the Baptistery.

"But, why the Baptistery?" Because Shimako-san didn't know the reason, she inquired of Shizuka-sama. The reason they were being guided to not the Duomo, or the art museum, but the Baptistery. At that, a small smile came to Shizuka-sama's lips.

"Because it is a place that interests me," was all the answer she gave.

They traced a shape back towards the entrance of the piazza where the Baptistery was. It was a round, white, cute building.

In front of the door to receive them was the official in charge, a young, pretty blonde woman. You could probably say of this woman that she was an "Italian beauty." She was wearing a police uniform, so she was also pretty cool.

They entered inside, which was a big, undivided space. In the middle stood a big, octagonal thing like a bathtub, which appeared to be the baptismal font.

"So?" Yumi was being asked for her frank thoughts.

"Well, it looks like a big bathtub."

"Wait a second, Yumi-san," Mami-san impudently poked Yumi in the arm.

However, Shizuka-sama said, "As expected of Yumi-san."

"Eh?"

"That's the real answer to the question earlier. It's the reason I am interested in this place. Because it looks like a big bathroom."

"Ah." As she answered, Shizuka's words became more and more enigmatic. Although there was no one around to explain, they all inclined their necks and looked around the area.

Just then, the interior of the Baptistery went suddenly dark. The door, which had been open until now, was closed with a clicking. Something was about to begin, said a noisy tourist. At which the Italian Beauty came out and indicated that they should all be quiet with a “Shh.”

Bo--ng, bo--ng.

The sound of a huge bell.

(Ah)

She understood. An echo.

Because it wasn't possible to speak, Yumi looked at Shizuka-sama. A big bath room, she had said, this was. Shizuka-sama nodded, smiling. Correct, it seemed.

Continuing, the Italian beauty's voice came out, “Ah--.” A beautiful voice. And the original “Ah--” did not disappear, but she made the sound again.

The “Ah--” flew towards the ceiling. A third time, then a fourth. All of them different sounds. However, because it was a harmony, even if the sounds overlapped they didn't become impure, each sound was favored and it became beautiful music.

Here, it was possible to pile up one person's voice one upon itself. When the sung passage was completed, the audience applauded. As the applause echoed in the ceiling, it sounded like many more people clapped than were there.

Before the doors were opened, Shizuka-sama walked over to the Italian beauty, and said something in Italian. The response seemed to be like “Please, go ahead,” so Shizuka-sama walked over to the spot where the Italian beauty had stood just a moment ago and took a very deep breath. And then, in the next moment.

“Ah--” A voice that pierced right to heaven resounded in the Baptistery.

And, a second voice. A beautiful voice.

Goose bumps rose.

An aria passage from a hymn maybe, it was a song she had not heard. The song was transparent, like the clear blue sky.

As the echo grew, Shizuka lowered her head. At this unexpected participation, the tourists from many countries broke out in thunderous acclaim. People came over seeking a handshake.

“What do you call that piece?”

“It was an improvisation. I couldn’t think of a piece of music that would make a nice echo.”

The remaining sound still did not become fouled, no matter how many times it repeated, unless one made a special effort. Like the fundamental of treading on the pedal when playing a piano.

“I wanted to try that once,” Shizuka-sama stuck out her tongue. “You guys better get going.”

That was what she said. But really, they thought that it had been a present for her kouhai who had come from far-off Japan.

Part 3.

By the time they left the Baptistery, it was 1:40. Shizuka-sama would part from them, Shimako-san informed them and the four turned together towards the Leaning Tower. To go up the Leaning Tower, you would need both hands, basically. Slightly apart from the spot were lockers in which you could leave your luggage on standby. Tsutako-san took the camera from around her neck and put it in her bag, then replaced that with a small camera that she took out and put in her pocket. What on earth – how many of those things did she have?

“You know, my heart’s beating a little hard.” Like the time she had ridden a jet coaster, that kind of weird nervous feeling. Of Pine class, almost sixteen had not made it past halfway. Was that a lot, or few? Already, Shimako-san was looking like she did not want to go up. Her reason was “I’m afraid of heights.” As that was completely plausible, they had to bow their heads in consent.

Although she had not specifically asked her, Yumi thought that, when Sachiko-sama had come to Pisa last year, she probably did not climb the tower. On the other hand, Sachiko-sama, who hated to lose, would not have said “because I’m afraid.” She would have said, “What fun is going up a tower?” or “I do not care for places that lean” to explain her refusal.

The time had come; little by little they entered the Leaning Tower.

In the middle there was a stone staircase; there was a wall because there was nothing scarier in the imagination than the view outside. Because it was a cylindrical building, the stair was a spiral staircase. If one intently climbed the stairs, one would never see outside.

However, it might not be scary but it would still be a hard walk. But then, it was leaning. Of course.

Except that the brain worked too well, and without permission corrected information received from the eyes, so that the building appeared straight. So, even if you head knew that it was leaning, it felt as if you were treading on a vertical stair. And because the building was really slanting, there was a kind of unpleasant sense in one's legs, like gravity. When you passed a place where there wasn't a wall, there was a feeling they weren't accustomed to, of having been pulled away.

"Rei-sama gave you permission, huh." Climbing the stone stairs made smooth by abrasion, not to mention the incline, was hard. What she was saying was that, with her usual excessive care, Rei-sama might not have wanted Yoshino-san to do something like this when she wasn't here.

"I didn't get Rei-chan's permission," Yoshino-san said, her breath short.

"So, what you're saying is you just did this on your own. 'Yumi-san and the others are climbing the tower. How brave.'"

"---"

If Rei-sama had said she could do it, Yoshino-san probably would have not had any interest in doing so, she thought.

"Yoshino-san, you'd better not put your hand in the Mouth of Truth."

"I didn't lie."

But. Well if you call it that, then no.

"Uhn. Impossible, impossible. I can't go out."

Along the way, at every important point, there was an opening in the wall, like a balcony to stick one's head out; but Mami-san began to shiver and shake.

"Walking on the inside only makes me less uneasy, right? If you walk on the outside, you can't stand upright, because the ground is leaning."

Really, it was the tower that was leaning.

“To make it worse, there’s **no ties.**”

There’s no ties. So, even if the tower wasn’t leaning, it would be “Impossible, impossible.” UNESCO required that world cultural sites be restored as exactly to the original as possible. If this was Japan, there would probably be iron bars in the holes, so you couldn’t go out of them.

“Anyway, let’s keep going up.” Tsutako-san led the suddenly droopy Mami-san with some encouragement. Because there were people coming up from behind, they didn’t go out at the outside spot, or they might block it here.

Sheesh, they weren’t ever going to finish the climb, they thought at this point; the stone staircase felt cramped, when soon they came across another open area. People who had climbed here before had stopped her to relax, so this probably wasn’t the end point.

“This place is, if you think about, three cylindrical shafts. The top one is the smallest, the second a little longer, all joined together, huh.” Putting their hands on the alcove, they were almost crawling on all fours. Although they could have stood upright, they vaguely feared doing so. Like they had said so many times before, the alcove was oblique. Their balance was completely destroyed, and at that moment, they all felt that the tower was a really dangerous place to be. Here there were some lines, thin ones that looked as if they would easily come off, in wide intervals. It was hard to believe in these lines too much, survival instinct said.

From time to time, they overtook other people, but at last they saw four people coming down. Looking up, there was a large round bit over which was a small round thing, in other word something like a donut shaped area, in which about 20 people stood crowding one another.

Far away below, the leaning earth. Way off, they could see a soccer field.

Because it was the top of the tower, the wind flapped as they looked around, a very strange feeling. The world had a completely different feeling from standing at the top of a tall, four cornered building. Therefore, in terms of human relations, if one could just put one foot in front of the other, and see things from an equal view, perhaps mutual understanding could be reached, maybe. Because it was such a high place, one naturally thought of grandiose things.

“It looks like there’s still a way to go up.” What should we do, Tsutako-san was asking, after she finished pressing her shutter and returned the camera to her pocket. Looking up, they could see four people going around on their way to the summit, and they could sense that there were people already up there.

The very top of the Tower, looked more like a pipe shape than like a like a temple bell tower. The very fine path that led up that pipe (of course, inclined) was not something she wanted to walk at all. She sat down with all her might in that spot.

“Impossible, impossible.”

“I’m going to the bus.”

“Me too.”

Mami-san, Yoshino-san and Yumi declared their retirement, at which Tsutako-san, who had asked in the first place muttered, “Ah, thank goodness.” She looked like she wondered what she would have done if the other three had said they wanted to go up.

In unanimity, they decided that “here is good,” and they started making their way down the Tower.

Part 4.

So they wouldn't slip, they descended the stone steps with prudence, went out the exit, and over to where Shizuka-sama waited.

"Please excuse me, Sensei." Politely bowing her head, she moved away from Maki-sensei. That's right, Maki-sensei was in charge of last year's second-year class, so she knew Shizuka-sama.

"I thought you had gone home," Yumi said, running up to Shizuka-sama.

"I wanted to have a relaxed chat with you."

So, that's why you waited?

Phew - . Was it uncool to say that she was happy about that? But really, the idea of her leaving made her feel sort of lonely.

"Yumi-san. We're going to the bathroom," Yoshino-san saying that she was going to the lockers to take their hand towels out of their bags. What did she want to do?

Yumi answered, "I'm okay I'll wait here." The others could go ahead.

"Is it okay?" Shizuka-sama inquired.

"Yes. I went at the fast food place in the train station."

After watching the three walk off in the direction of the back of the Duomo, Yumi and Shizuka-sama sat down in the middle of the lawn. It had a, how would you say it, a steadying influence.

"Shizuka-sama, do you live near here?"

In response to the inquiry, Shizuka-sama responded, "Not very near here, no," and took a notebook out of her bag. And in smooth characters wrote, then tore the paper out and stuck it out towards Yumi. Because it was a foreign address, she didn't know how near it was or not, but Shizuka-sama explained that it was next to Florence. She was now living with a relative's aunt who had an Italian husband (so Shizuka-sama said), and commuting to a private Italian music school, while preparing for taking college exams.

“Because it’s a relative’s home, your parents must be relieved, huh.”

“That’s so. Nevertheless, they are constantly calling. It’s very annoying. But, nothing happening, how are you, I wanted to hear your voice, that kind of thing, it makes me happy. They’re anxious. Taking an interest. They don’t say that, but it’s easy to hear.”

“You don’t call them?”

“Well, international phone calls are expensive. So it’s all on their side.” Shizuka-sama took something out from the notebook.

“Ah.”

It was a picture postcard of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. The address was already written on it and a stamp had been affixed.

“My parents don’t like computers and I can’t seem to manage letters. As long as they get a current report, they don’t mind that a little time has passed. What it is, is more important than the shape, right? Therefore, when I go to sight-seeing areas, I buy postcards and write my letters on them. Mail is mail, but this goes airmail.”

“Um, where did you buy that postcard? From one of the souvenir shops? What about the stamp? Is it okay if I run and get one myself?”

They had had something like that at the Vatican City museum, and she thought that might be true here as well. Thinking that there may be, she stood up precipitously. Shizuka-sama waited to rise before answering. “What’s the matter? Relax, Yumi-san. First, sit down here. You want to send a postcard to Japan?”

“Yes.”

“Sachiko-san, huh?” Nodding firmly, Shizuka-sama opened the notebook and pulled something else out from it. “Here, you can have this.”

What she was holding out was another picture postcard of Pisa, like the one before. Of course, this one was unused.

“Eh?” It appeared that she had a habit of buying several at once. Because she sent them to friends back in Japan, she used many at once, she said.

“It has a stamp.”

“That’s... Then, um, let me buy that please.”

“That’s not proper, Yumi-san. At such a time, you should say thank you very much.”

She looked just like a memory of Sachiko-sama when she had something similar previously. At Rei-sama’s kendo tournament, when she had bought a sandwich, because Yumi didn’t have money to pay for it.

“But.” Shizuka-sama wasn’t her onee-sama. So that wasn’t a reason. But if she obstinately refused it, that could be seen as being rude.

“However, I am your senior in age. Well, it’s fine. How about you give me something for the stamp.”

“Okay.”

This mutual give and take completed their negotiations. Yumi took the postcard from Shizuka-sama, and with a ballpoint pen wrote Sachiko-sama’s name and address on it.

“Uhh.” Now came the body of the text and that was more troublesome. First off, what would be good to write? On New Year’s postcards one wrote “Akemashite Omodetou” or “Kinga Shinnen”. For a seasonal card one wrote “This is a mid-summer enquiry after your health,” or something like that, the words were already decided upon. And starting with either “Haikai” or “Zenryaku” felt weird. It might be okay to just suddenly begin the message, but isn’t it usual to have a greeting? She thought she might start off with a question as a greeting.

“What’s the Italian version of gokigenyou?”

“Gokigenyou? Bon giorno has more of the nuance of konnichiwa, I think. Since you’re addressing it to Sachiko-sama, don’t you think it would be nice to put Cìào?”

“Cìào.”

“Yes. So, ‘Gokigenyou, onee-sama’ becomes ‘Cìào, sorella,’ you see.”

Shimai in Japanese was Sister in English, Sœur in French and in Italian it became Sorella. With Shizuka-sama telling her how to spell it, Yumi wrote down the words “Cìào Sorella!” with the marker she had bought in the Milan airport. And below that, in ballpoint pen she wrote. “Right now, I’m at Pisa, the trip is fun.”

“Yumi-san, you don’t yet have a little sister?” Shizuka-sama asked, when Yumi had finished writing and put the cover back on the pen.

“Yeah, so.”

“Doesn’t Sachiko-san nag you about it?”

“Not at this point.”

“I see. But, sooner or later it might have to be said, right” Shizuka-sama foretold vaguely, which weighed Yumi down with an uneasy sensation.

“So, it’s okay if you’re a little dependent right now.”

At these words, the episode with Shizuka-sama’s parents calling came to mind, and Yumi wrote these words on the very bottom of the postcard. “I miss you, Onee-sama” secretly and quickly put the card inside her bag so no one could see. Not just because of Shizuka-sama, but the others who had gone to the toilet, and were just coming back, too. If they knew she had written that, they were sure to be pretty cold about it.

“It was a pay toilet. In front of the entrance, there was a lady who was collecting money.” Because there was nothing like that in Japan, Yoshino-san seemed to have enjoyed it.

“I think I gave her the correct change.”

“Because you pay to use it, it wasn’t dirty at all.”

As she heard Tsutako-san and Mami-san’s report, Yumi wondered if she should attempt the challenge, or if it would be better to try the challenge of mailing the postcard addressed to Sachiko-sama.

“On the road back, do you three want to try an Italian gelato?”

“While we were climbing the tower, Itsue-san and her group were eating, they said.”

“We missed eating it at the Spanish Steps, right?”

That hadn’t been because she refused. No, it was the exact opposite. She had taken the initiative in wanting to eat it. Yumi had a sweet tooth.

“A gelato shop, huh? From here, go straight out on this road, past the bar and the restaurant. There’s one there,” said Shizuka-sama with a “you’ll soon understand.”

“Eh? What about you, Shizuka-sama?”

“Because I took my time chatting with Yumi-san, I have to leave. Unless I go home, I won’t be able to prepare for my lessons tomorrow.”

“Is that right?”

“And because it was very warm today, it’s a little...” Because there was a little anxiety in the words, she did not pursue the thought deeply. Maybe it was something like, when it was warm she made more progress with her studies, or her voice came out easier, or something like that.

“Right, Yumi-san. Give me that postcard to mail. Although there are many places to post one, you could be searching for one for a while if you don’t know where to look.”

“Ah, is that all right with you? Thank you very much. It’s a real help.” What she really mean was that if anyone in the group read those words “I miss you, Onee-sama,” it would be really embarrassing. But all that couldn’t be said, so the picture of the Leaning Tower was passed over quietly.

“Then, take care.”

“Thank you for the postcard.”

“When you take a *sœur*, write me a proper letter and tell me.”

“Yes.”

Yumi watched after Shizuka-sama as she walked towards the entrance, then turned towards the gelato shop.

This was twice the size of a normal store. Looking into the glass cases, she could see many varieties of ice cream all lined up. There was chocolate and others she could figure out easily, and some with some kind of fruit in them that she didn't know. They didn't have the linguistic skills to ask for an explanation, but somehow gesturing and saying “this, this” seemed to work.

They moved to an edge of the street and ate it right away.

“Delicious.” However, if you compared it to the usual kind of ice cream you got at a Japanese store, it was incredibly creamy.

“This country's approach to ice cream is very leisurely,” Mami-san muttered and the others smiled.

“Rosa Canina,” Yoshino-san said, as she licked her vanilla gelato, “sure seemed very reserved with us.”

Because Yumi thought what Yoshino-san had said might be true, her simple conjecture changed into a conviction. Thinking about it, she fell into a daze.

“Ah, Yumi-san, you're dripping!” The chocolate gelato had melted and was dripping from the cone, over her hand and down onto the earth in big drops.

“Wah-” She licked at the gelato quickly, but it continued to melt. “W-aah. I can't even taste it.”

Now she all of a sudden understood what Shizuka-sama had meant when she said “It's warm today so it's a little...” With a teeny little bitterness for not having been warned, she thought that Shizuka-sama must be one of those people who, from childhood, are prone to playing pranks. A person's true nature isn't going to change, just because they are in a foreign country. This time, Yumi lost to her negligence.

“Yumi-san, look over here.”

At the moment she lifted her face to respond to the words, she heard the sound of the shutter.

“Wow... Got it.” It was a pretty homely face. Now. “Thanks.” Tsutako-san, who had finished eating the gelato early, had taken a picture of Yumi.

The Parakeet's Hint

Part 1.

On Wednesday, each group would be doing their own tour. Compared to Rome, Florence was a small town and it seemed that the teachers could keep an eye on them much more easily.

First, Yumi's group went to the Uffizi Museum. Even though the school had put in a reservation for them for some time, because there were many tourists from all over the world who had also made reservations, the line for those with reservations was long, and of the two lines, it was hard to see which was longer. When they saw such a long line stretching out of the museum entrance, some tourists gave up and left.

They waited about twenty minutes, making their entrance safely. Good luck seeing everything in a day without collapsing, so one decides on what one wants to see using the guidebook and makes the circuit.

First, they wanted to see the pretty famous Sandro Botticelli's "Birth of Venus" and "Spring." "The Birth of Venus" had Venus standing inside a large clamshell, on her left she was embraced by two wind gods who were creating the winds that carried her to shore, on the right are young women waiting for Venus with a mantle. The sea and sky are blue. The pink color distributed throughout in the key points of mantle and flowers was beautiful.

"Spring" was one of those painting that Yumi, when she was young, considered "a picture I don't get." Venus in the middle of a forest where petals were falling, the three fates, the goddess of spring, Flora, and other spirits were arranged in a way that when you looked at the whole, it didn't seem possible that such a shapeless picture would work. In a fine arts book, or a junior high school textbook on art, she couldn't remember the first book she had seen it in, but it was because of the bit with the goddess of spring Flora. Now, with the thing in front of her, it didn't look at all like a collage.

“Is that right? Don’t you think you’re over thinking it a bit?” Yoshino-san said.

This was like “Maria-sama no kokoro,” a problem that Yumi might hold onto for her entire life.

For Leonardo Da Vinci, there was “The Annunciation.” When one spoke of Da Vinci, the work that came to mind was “The Mona Lisa” but too bad, that wasn’t here. This was the first time she had learned of his “Annunciation” and it was another lovely picture of Mary, which Yumi was totally interested in. She decided that this was the number two Annunciation, right after Angelico’s.

But the great bird of “Pictures to see” was Raphael’s “Madonna of the Goldfinch.” In John the Baptist’s hand was a goldfinch, being petted by Jesus-sama, while watching over them was Maria-sama, it was absolutely beautiful!

“I got it,” Yumi muttered, while walking down a hallway of ancient sculpture. “I like beautiful paintings of Maria-sama.”

Just so.

“I just understood something too.” Yoshino-san said.

“What’s that?” she replied, when the answer came back.

“With so many statues of naked men lined up, after a while you stop blushing at each one separately.”

--So it was.

Part 2.

Other than the pictures they specifically wanted to view, they just floated around looking at things, then left the museum and walked around until just about lunchtime.

“Now then, what shall we do?” Yumi’s, Yoshino-san’s, Tsutako-san’s and Mami-san’s, eyes met. The afternoon plan they had decided upon, at least for the moment, was shopping (primarily window), but now they were hungry. Back at school, there were people whose desire was for panini, but none of these four had wanted that, so now there didn’t know what to do for lunch. Yesterday evening, at the time the teacher had confirmed those who wanted to climb the leaning tower, “if you’re not going up what are you going to do” somehow became the generous “you’re on your own for lunch.”

Anyway, that left them at the beginning of the conversation on “what shall we do?” as they gazed at the Arno River.

“If we were in Japan, we’d look for a fast food place or a combi. They aren’t marked on this map. However, we could go back to the station.” Mami-san flipped randomly through the pages of the guidebook.

“Eh-. I don’t want to eat the same hamburger I had yesterday for lunch.”

“But Yoshino-san. Do you have the confidence to go into a place to eat?”

“No. And in the second place, I don’t know the right etiquette.”

Yeah, Yumi nodded vigorously. “I don’t really understand how the money works. Tax and tips for service seem really difficult.”

Then, what should they do.

“Anyway, why don’t we walk and think about it? I’m really hungry.” At Tsutako-san’s one voice, the four all turned and walked along the river. If they should happen to pass a food store, they might find an answer to their problem unexpectedly easily.

The Ponte Vecchio was a marvelous bridge, with rows of jeweler's shops lined up on both sides. At the beginning there had been meat shops or greengrocers that were open, but Ferdinand I had hated the smell and had all the butcher shops replaced by jewelers. He seemed a proud sort, like Archduke Toscana, when you looked into it.

Precious metals weren't really necessary for high school students. Of course they were interested, but they had only brought a little pocket money so they really couldn't buy anything. In other words, they were only able to endure to Ponte Vecchio because they looked at it from the outside. When they were grown up and worked, they'd have the money and freedom to come back here.

"But you know, this is a really old town," Tsutako-san pointed out as she finished crossing, after she had stopped to take a commemorative photo of the bridge.

The road extended off the Ponte Vecchio in a straight line, coming out in front of the Palazzo Pitti. Relying on the guidebook, there were many museums and art galleries in the area but if they went sightseeing, they wouldn't be able to shop for the purpose they originally intended, so they'd just have to come back to the vicinity. Of the two, this side of the Arno river left a much more relaxed impression than the other side with the station.

"Okay, I got it," Mami-san suddenly stopped where she stood and said. "This store is for takeout."

The here she was speaking of was, when they stopped and looked in front of them was what looked to be an Italian bar.

"Takeout, huh... I see."

In here, they wouldn't have to worry so much about tax or tip. And they'd be clear of having to deal with another hamburger situation.

"The person who wants in on this idea, stop this finger." Mami-san stuck her pointer finger out and the other three dug at it.

"Can I take out okay?"

Takeout meant what Japanese called “Omochikaeru”, and they later understood, the guy in the store comprehended. The four each bought a panini and a bottle of something to drink and left the store.

“Well, we did it somehow.”

“That’s true. That one wants to sell, this one wants to buy. If one tries with all one’s might, one will be able to comprehend what the other’s words mean.”

Crossing back over the Ponte Vecchio, they temporarily decided to head back to the hotel. Because eating in the street was bad manners, they didn’t have time to look for a pizza or a park like area, so they decided to go to the hotel.

Panini and a drink. In the end, it was the same kind of thing one would get for a school lunch, nonetheless, all four had a sense of achievement. Regardless of the result, the process was different.

What was easily arranged in Japan, had certain risk in a foreign country.

Going on a field trip was a lump of heart-pounding excitement.

Part 3.

After they ate lunch, they flew out once again.

First they went to a store so she could buy marble paper stationery, as a souvenir for Sachiko-sama.

“I wonder if it would be okay to buy souvenirs for Tōko-chan and Kanako-chan.”

Shimako-san would buy some thing as a souvenir for Noriko-chan, since she was her onee-sama. As Yumi muttered, Yoshino-san answered.

“Is that okay?”

“Which meaning of that do you mean?”

That she should buy something “iinjanai?” or that she shouldn’t buy something “iinjanai?” But Yoshino-san’s “iinjanai” wasn’t a buy or don’t buy “iinjanai.” She appeared to be trying to decide on a souvenir for Rei-sama, as if in a dream. That’s what that was. Mami-san was hesitating over buying a souvenir for Tsukiyama Minako-sama, and Tsutako-san, was setting up pictures of people she didn’t know. In the small shop, other Lillian students had come to buy things.

Before long, Yoshino-san carried two small boxes to the register and, as she recalled the earlier conversation started it up again. “I think you should buy something, but...”

“But?”

“Yumi-san, which are you going to make your sœur?”

“Which...?”

In this situation “which” referred to her choosing either Tōko-chan or Kanako-chan.

“Because you can’t become sœur with two people, they shouldn’t expect too much.”

“Expect, huh?” So maybe she should only get one souvenir. That was what she thought, but she didn’t want anyone to misunderstand, so she would probably be best off being careful.

Little sister.

One year ago, when Sachiko-sama had targeted her, there was a rumor in the school that she had become Sachiko-sama's "sœur candidate." A lot happened then, and she had been frightened of the curious glances that were being shot at her from all around her. Because in the end she had become sœur, now it was just a funny memory, but. If she caused that kind of thing to be said about those girls, it would be sad. If it was not necessary, she would seek to avoid it.

"So what about you, Yoshino-san? Did you buy a rosary for your future sœur at the Vatican?"

"I didn't. I had a change of heart."

"Ehh, why was that?"

"I tried to imagine make a present of one to someone and came up empty. Therefore."

"Therefore?"

"I guess I'll give them the precious rosary I was given by Rei-chan, since I couldn't find one pretty enough to choose for my little sister."

Wow, those words had some persuasive power.

Yoshino-san had really given some serious thought to this, Yumi understood clearly.

Part 4.

After paying at the register once again, wandering around with her friends who had been waiting while she shopped, she spotted something else she wanted. Then, after buying some additional stationery, the four headed towards the Duomo.

They walked along the Arno river until they returned to the Ponte Vecchio, then from there North. They altered your course from the Duomo to the west, to the area around the Basilica of Santa Maria Novella, roughly around where the Arno appeared, then headed south from there back to the hotel. With such a broad course, it was perfectly okay if they digressed from the route.

Because it was impossible for them in the brand name stores, they aimed for small stores that sold small items, like stalls that sell city souvenirs. They were curious for a moment about what was considered a department store in Italy.

“Go-ki-gen-yo-u.”

As they left a branch store, Yumi suddenly heard a voice. A greeting from above in Japanese. Hearing someone calling out to her so suddenly, she looked all around them, but didn't see anyone. For anyone to greet them that way, they would have to be a Lillian student or teacher, but...

Thinking that it was her imagination, she began to walk away when she heard it again.

“Gokigenyou.”

Mami-san said, “Ah” and pointed.

There was a leather goods shop that sold bags and belts; not for sale itself, but high up among the goods was a bird, a large parakeet.

“That talked?”

“Probably. Gokigenyou.” Mami-san spoke to the bird. Just so. And sure enough, “Gokigenyou” was returned.

“Wah, cool. Pretty clever. Gokigenyou.” Finding talking to a bird interesting, everyone offered a greeting. In every case, Mr. Parakeet returned the greeting cordially. “Go-ki-gen-you.”

Probably some Lillian student that had passed by previously taught it. They thought maybe it was one of the B Course students who were returning from Venice.

Because of the parakeet young women would stop in front of the store happily, the store’s owner grinned and said “Gokigenyou.” It might be too bad, but he wasn’t really keeping the bird just because it could mimic humans.

“Go-ki-gen-you.” The parakeet continued to talk, hitting its stride. “Yo-u-ko-so, Fi-re-n-ze e.” It was definitely like someone had hit the repeat button on an audio recording, but another word might fly out causally.

“Firenze yoi toko ichido ha oide.”

Who had taught it those words, was the first thing they thought, amazed. As the next words flew out, Yumi stiffened.

“Firenze sembei, Firenze sembei.”

“No way, isn’t this a bag shop?”

Tsutako-san and Mami-san were grabbing their stomachs laughing but, Yumi and Yoshino-san met each other’s gaze. Florence sembei really existed? ----So it said.

And then, the parakeet launched into a new set of words.

“Mou yamenasaiyo, Satō-san”

Satō-san.

Satō-san... Satō-san, it said. No way.

--No way, Satō Sei-sama-!?

Part 5.

“Hey, you really think it was Sei-sama again?” Yumi asked Yoshino-san, coming out of the bathroom, which was boiling.

“I don’t know. No matter how long I think about it, I can’t come to any conclusion. Unless Sei-sama appears in front of us soon.”

Afterwards, they discussed it as they walked. And when they returned to the hotel, and at their seats at dinner. Their eyes met and the topic of conversation they decided on was ‘whether Sei-sama was here in Italy, or not.’ They put all their reasoning into it, but after all inference is inference. It’s not like a mystery novel where the great detective would appear and pfft! The answer would appear.

“Ah, give me that.” Yumi had seen the label in her hand; Yoshino-san held it out on her palm. It was medicine for indigestion.

Every night they were eating a heavy meal with meat at a different restaurant. The Japanese were originally agricultural people, and even though they were young, so much meat couldn’t be digested all at once.

“More importantly, are you done packing? You’re so busy thinking, that you’re not paying attention to the matter at hand.”

Tomorrow morning, they would be vacating the hotel, and heading towards their final sight-seeing stop, Venice. She wasn’t avoiding the matter at hand, which was the stationery, which appeared to be bent.

“When you get home, everyone will understand.” Yoshino-san said, washing down the stomach medicine with water from a plastic bottle.

“That’ may be true, but...” Like the meat, this was too gloomy a topic tonight and caused dyspepsia.

From The Water Capital to the Island Nation

Part 1.

The Eurostar departed just after 10:30 AM from Santa Maria Novella station, and arrived about 1:30 in the afternoon at Venice's Santa Lucia station. That worked out to about 3 hours, but somewhere in the middle she dozed off, so it didn't feel like that long.

When they arrived at the station, they took a water bus to San Marco square. It didn't seem like there was a single car running.

Because they were returning home tomorrow, they were only staying for one night in Venice. Since that amounted to only a half day visit, they left their luggage at the hotel and went to San Marco Square for lunch at an open café.

First they went to see San Marco Cathedral, and from there, the main event of the day, the challenge of riding on one of Venice's famous gondolas.

They went to the gondola embarkation point, where negotiations on the fare would start.

"It seems like they overcharge right off, so we have to be careful."

The four met in advance to compare guidebooks.

"Then, the highest we'll go is 2,500 yen per person."

The courses differed a little, but it appeared that the market price was about 10,000 Japanese yen.

As they tried to figure out the cost, it appeared that the price did not go up or down based on the number of people riding one boat. But because in the end, the number of people would split the fee, it was necessary to discuss it, so each person knew what they would have to pay.

So, the simple calculation was $10,000 \div 4 = 2,500$ total.

"What if it's over 2,500 yen?"

"Then we'll move onto another gondola. There's no reason for us to ignore the market price and hand over an inordinate amount of money."

It seemed that showing signs of going elsewhere would make the price come down. In fact, right off when Tsutako-san said that this gondola was more than twice their budget, she succeeded in bargaining enough to bring the price down into their range.

“That’s good, because it’s not like we have bags of money.” Yumi and the others turned their back and huddled, arms around each other’s shoulder, speaking in Japanese. The gondolier followed them, puzzled, asking in a mix of Italian and English something that would probably be, “How much money do you have.” Because negotiations break down when an excessively low amount is put out, they suggested 2,000 yen per person, which was answered with a “that’s unreasonable” pose. In the end, they agreed on a forty-five minute course for 10,000 yen, which, since it was market price, they couldn’t say they had gained or lost anything.

Later, when they asked, they learned that negotiating as a group wasn’t as good as one person, the same forty-five minute course could be gotten for 2,000 yen. However, there had been a group of adults, who had to pay 3,300 yen per person and who handed over the money very stiffly.

In any case, the negotiations completed, they got onto a gondola at the embarkation spot near San Marco Square.

The oarsman was called a gondolier. The gondolier for Yumi and the other’s gondola was a young man. A striped shirt and broad-brimmed hat was the uniform, which made all the guys steering the gondolas look kind of cool.

Floating lightly out of the grand canal, they entered a smaller canal. Like going from the highway to a back road.

There were the backs of three- and four-story pastel-colored buildings all lined up, as the gondola passed with a swish, swish. As the gondola moved down the road, there would be narrow bridges made from brick or some stone like white marble, each one very beautiful.

The gondolier was very talkative. In very slow English, which they did not interrupt, he explained about the city.

“I didn’t get about a third of that,” Yoshino-san said, grinning. Yeah, absolutely. But, here and there, they could make out a word or two and scrape together enough to think something like, “the main point is roughly this,” and it was nice to just ride the gondola and relax. What it was actually like in the thirteenth century, stories of the people who ruled here in the past, those could all be looked up later. For this moment, they would just look at the scenery of these old streets, and feel what it was like to glide down a canal.

At the beginning of the trip, Mami-san had taken a lot of notes, but recently she hadn’t opened her notebook at all. It appeared that she thought that if she wanted the readers of the Lillian Kwaraban to ride along happily on their trip, she really needed to feel it from the surface down.

At the intersections of canals where the view was obstructed, the gondoliers would call out loudly. Like a signal that said, “My gondola is approaching the intersection now.” It was probably the custom in order to avoid accidents, since there were no traffic signals.

About halfway, in a narrow space with limited room, a large boat loaded with luggage came at them.

“I wonder if we’re going to bump against them.”

But, the gondolier guiding them was a pro. He was young, but he was a third generation gondolier, and he probably rode in his grandfather’s gondola many times.

The gondolas looked similar, but the interiors were decorated differently depending on the owner. Like the kind of people who love their cars and relentlessly work on them to make them reflect themselves. Probably, everyone has their “obsession.”

At one point they left a main canal to pass under the Rialto Bridge. On the bridge above, they could see students wearing Lillian uniforms; although they couldn't tell who they were, they waved at them from the gondola.

As they passed the Rialto, they quickly moved into a small canal. Their gondolier, handling the gondola beautifully, began to sing a canzone. He had a great voice.

"I wonder if there are any Italians who can't sing well, although I guess the one's who sing badly just don't sing. Or, if they can't sing, maybe they can't become a gondolier, I guess." This artless question popped into her mind, but she didn't have the language skills to ask it.

"If being a gondolier is hereditary, then it's likely that it has to do with both genetics and surroundings it, doesn't it?" Yoshino-san said.

"I see." That it has to do with genetics and surroundings seemed like strange words coming for this person that had just begun kendo. After all, in her situation, after a little more time passed, she would see if it had any affect or not.

The approached the San Marco grand canal from the side, from the "Bridge of Sighs."

"There's a legend that, if you kiss the one you love as you pass under this bridge it will be an eternal love. However..." As Mami-san muttered this, they could hear the gondolier say "kiss" and "tradition."

"Kiss, huh." Having received that information, what could this group of four from a girls' high school do with it. Oh, right, they suppressed their giggles, the gondolier probably said, "next time, with your future lover."

"But, you know," after they passed under the Bridge of Sighs, Mami-san picked up the conversation where it had been cut off. "The truth about that bridge is that in former days, prisoners were led over it to their executions, and knowing that they would never return, and that their bodies would give up their last breath, they would grieve, which is why it's called the "Bridge of Sighs. It kills the dream, doesn't it."

“Eh -” The bridge that joined the Ducal Palace and the neighboring prison - that was the Bridge of Sighs. That was the correct explanation. But, what would the feelings of the many couples that have kissed under that bridge, be if they knew that, she wondered?

“Well, even if you know the reason for the sighs, you can repudiate that and accept the legend.”

“That’s true, but...”

But, you’d be kissing under all those prisoner’s sighs. She thought that there’d be no small number of couples that would reconsider, once they knew.

“Um. I wonder what I would do.”

Although they had no partners, the four high school girls continued to ponder.

Although he didn’t understand Japanese, the gondolier could see that something was worrying his customers so, grinning broadly, he exerted his authority on the waters of the canal.

Last spurt.

The gondola docks came into view.

Part 2.

Because there wasn't too much time before they had to meet up with everyone at 5 o'clock, so they decided to peek in some souvenir shops.

When you say Venice, you think of Venetian glass. Thinking that they'd buy some for their homes, they were shocked when they saw the price tag.

"It's unexpectedly expensive."

"It's the cost of being in a tourist area, isn't it?" Tourist areas are always more expensive.

But, being poor high school girls they just couldn't put their hands on that kind of pocket money.

In the end, after looking into a few stores, Yumi got her mother a Venetian glass pendant, her father a Venetian glass tie pin, Yūki a Venetian glass bookmark as souvenirs.

The store owners spoke a smattering of Japanese as they were served. Obviously many Japanese tourists visited here.

As they stood on the Rialto Bridge at twilight, they heard some sort of bustling noise. When they looked at their feet, a gondola carrying a band playing their instruments passed by underneath.

Part 3.

Venetian cuisine had an abundance of delicious seafood and shellfish.

Lobster, crab, squid and mantis shrimp. The ingredients reminded them of Japan, as they lay there. As expected of the Water Capital. They suddenly became conscious of how tired their stomachs were of Florence's meat. Of course, it wasn't sashimi, and the cuisine was drenched in olive oil.

The hotel room was large, gorgeous and old-fashioned. There was no modern card key, instead they had a large, heavy metal key and furthermore, the lock was massive and took some skill to open. However, because of that, it had the weight to swing shut locking one out in the hallway, which became a burden to the hotel staff who had to come to the rescue of many of the students.

Coming out of the bath, Yoshino spread her luggage out on top of the red, pink and gold bed and turned on the TV.

"Hey, look."

Coming from the TV was the sound of Japanese, and reflected on the screen was an image of a Japanese home living room.

"What... What's that?"

"A Japanese drama."

But, the set really felt like a set. The actors were all acting serious, so why did the living room look like it was from a comic tale?

"It's probably more than twenty years old."

When she asked how she would know that, it turned out that an actress that Yoshino's mother liked when she was young, was in it. That actress had died several years before Yumi and the others had been born.

"Ah -, I know this young guy. He's, uh, I can't think of his name, but he's in a drama now, playing the evil grandfather of the lead man."

"That's right!"

It wasn't unreasonable that Yoshino-san stopped in the middle of packing. In far-off Italy, they were watching a Japanese television program, after all. And so, they found themselves involved in a drama from the past.

"Last week must have been really awful, huh. But, the person who holds the key to the secret of the lead's birth, leaves every time."

"I don't want this drama to stop. I'd look forward to every Thursday."

They chatted energetically for a while, when they both suddenly realized.

"What day is it today?"

She had a bad feeling. A really, really bad feeling. Before she could answer, Yoshino-san leapt for the phone.

"Hello, Auntie? Get Rei-chan!"

Looking at her wristwatch, it was just a little before 11 o'clock. If you added eight hours, it was around 7 in the morning in Japan. Rei-sama should be up about now.

"Ah, Rei-chan.?"

Yoshino-san didn't preface her conversation with "How are you?" or "Sorry for calling so early?", but suddenly found herself rattling on quickly, coming to the main point.

"Eh? Um. Ah, is that right. No, then, fine. Take care."

Watching Yoshino-san replace the receiver feebly, she seemed out of it.

"So. Rei-chan found that drama too painful to watch, halfway through Italy. Ah - I fail. That drama we watch on Thursday, I completely forgot that we're leaving Friday morning. Ah, Yoshino, you idiot." She actually stamped her foot in regret, then lightly gripped Yumi's shoulder.

"Yumi-san."

"Y... Yes."

“Of course, Yumi-san recorded it, right? Hey, when you’re done watching it, lend me the video. I’ll give it back before next week’s show.” She made the request with an extremely adorable “please, oh please” face.

“...The truth is that I forgot.”

“Eh-”

“Sorry.”

Yumi was in the same boat as Yoshino-san. Going out without thinking “I should record this” show on Friday, so she could enjoy watching the Thursday evening drama, because she hadn’t thought that she would be returning on the day of the broadcast.

The old drama was over, the screen changed to a news program. Here it was late night, but the announcer greeted them brightly with the familiar “Ohayou Gozaimasu.” And this was followed by the date, stated clearly. “Today is Friday and this is the seven o’clock AM news.”

While they had all been happily riding in a gondola, that Thursday evening show had ended.

Part 4.

It was Friday morning, Italy time.

They took a water bus from San Marco Square to Marco Polo airport, and from there headed to the Milan airport.

The Milan airport was where, one week ago, they had alighted in Italy for the first time.

The flight to Narita was in about two hours so, as they had an hour of free time, Yumi and the others headed over towards the stores to look for souvenirs to buy for the Rose Mansion.

“I didn’t see any senbei in Florence at all. No one else in my group had heard of it, either.” They were walking with Shimako-san. They had sought her out conscientiously for free time.

“That’s because no one was selling it,” Yoshino-san guffawed. The moment when the parakeet said those words and she said “maybe it does exist” notwithstanding.

“So, what should I do?” No matter how many stores that sold sweets they searched through, they couldn’t find ‘manju from Rome’ or ‘senbei from Florence.’

I wonder if chocolate wouldn’t be all right? Not the same as last year’s though.”

“Not those, but something tasty.”

Shimako-san and Yoshino-san were, this time last year, already in residence at the Rose Mansion, so they knew what souvenirs had been brought back from last year’s field trip. Not only knew them, but had eaten them, most likely. Yumi was a little, no, very jealous of them about this.

Eventually, when they had chosen one box of chocolates from the many, many boxes of chocolates on display, the three of them each contributed money to buy it.

After that, since she still had a little pocket money left over, Yumi bought some sundried tomatoes and porcini mushrooms for her family. She was really going to buy some olive oil, but the bottle was heavy and she was scared that on the way, it would break and spill all over.

“Hey, Shimako-san, about Sei-sama,” Yumi said, while they waited on line for the register. She hadn’t yet told her about the incident with the parakeet in Florence.

But before she could ask, Shimako-san answered. “I guess she was here after all.”

“You met her!?” Surprised, she and Yoshino-san raised their voices.

“No.” Shimako-san shook her head back and forth. “But, I could sense her. As if she was near.”

More than the testimony of someone who has seen someone that looked like her, or a parakeet that spoke the words Satō-san, she wondered if Shimako-san saying that she “felt” her there had more credibility.

“Then, why didn’t Sei-sama contact you?”

Like with Shizuka-sama. But outside free time, they didn’t have much time to meet. Yumi didn’t ask.

What was Sei-sama’s feeling, she didn’t ask Shimako-san, either.

“I wonder if it’s just conceit,” Shimako-san smiled a little at herself. “I think, though, that it was for my sake.”

For Shimako-san’s sake.

Because those words had come from Shimako-san’s mouth, they had the ring of truth.

Sei-sama had not met up with Shimako-san, for her sake.

Sei-sama and Shimako-san, no matter how far apart they were, were still connected. To Yumi, they were a magnificent sample of this.

Part 5.

Inside the plane, it was identical to the incoming trip: sleep - wake up - eat - go to the bathroom, about two times each, until at last, they had returned to Japan. Coming back felt faster than going, even though the time spent inside the plane wasn't any shorter, maybe because she was tired, she had slept longer, she thought.

In Japan, it was Saturday mid-morning.

With the sound of Japanese fluttering about around them, it suddenly really felt like they were home, but Yumi, still doozy with being overseas, said "Thank you," to the person who held the door for her in the bathroom. Even though the other person was Japanese. They broke up into classes and had a simple homeroom at the airport.

The contents of the teacher's discussion was mainly warnings. "Be careful going home." "Don't drop anything." "Because we have school on Monday, spend this weekend at home, resting." Even if they hadn't said it specifically, the students would probably do that. Everyone was tired and thinking of getting to their beds soon.

Because it was Saturday and there shouldn't be too much rush hour traffic, Yumi thought, she called home.

"See you." She parted from Yoshino, who had slept the whole way back on the bus, at K Station.

"I'm sorry for making you carry the souvenir," Shimako-san said to Yoshino-san.

"It's fine, it's fine. I live nearest the school, I walk to school and don't have to deal with the car or train rush, so don't have to worry that the box will collapse or the chocolates will melt." Yoshino-san offered her service with spirit.

"More importantly, Yumi-san," turning her head, she came close to Yumi.

"Yes."

“Give Yūki-kun my enthusiastic regards.”

“...I’ll pass that along.” At Yumi’s answer, Yoshino-san nodded, satisfied, picked up the bag of souvenirs and her luggage, then disappeared out the exit.

Shimako-san leaned her head to the side, looking puzzled.

“Yūki thought to record the television drama for me, that Yoshino-san had forgotten to record. He’s reliable that way.”

“Ah, I see. That’s why she looked so happy.” But even if there was no rush, it seemed that she had brandished the bag with the chocolates just a little. The two thought so at the same time, their eyes had met, but neither of them said anything.

“So that’s the way it is.”

She couldn’t see Yoshino-san’s figure anymore.

“Yumi-san, Shimako-san, can we go with you part of the way home?” Mami-san and Tsutako-san lined up next to them on the escalator.

“Sure.” Yumi and Shimako-san’s replies conjoined. Although her sailor collar had fluttered a bit, and she had carried her bag jauntily, Yoshino-san hadn’t seemed any different.

Although they were all tired, everyone seemed a little extra bubbly to be on the way home.

Ah, she was really looking forward to that.

Souvenir Report

Part 1.

She didn't know if it was because she was slightly jet-lagged or what, but she only became tired on Saturday as she washed the clothes she had worn on the trip, and she slept the whole day on Sunday.

For that reason, although she thought about making a welcome home call to Onee-sama, by the time she woke up properly, there wasn't really time to make a proper phone call, so after all, she just waited until Monday to greet her.

"I'm back, Onee-sama."

"Welcome home." It had been a week since she had been able to see Sachiko-sama, who was unchanged. Somehow, she was a little embarrassed by the "I miss you" on the letter she had sent.

She had visited her class before morning worship, and handed over the souvenirs in the garden. The marble-patterned paper and a little photo album.

"Did you take many photographs?" Sachiko-sama asked, in the middle of opening.

"Ah, yes. Tsutako-san did."

"I see. Did you have fun?"

"Yes."

At her little nod, Sachiko-sama smiled and said, "That's good."

"Um, but, I never found "Roman manju" or "Florentine senbei"."

"Eh?"

"So, um," Yumi's attempt to explain was interrupted by Sachiko saying, "You thought that was serious? You didn't realize that it was a joke?"

"J... Joke?"

Liar.

"I thought you understood that, since at the time, you laughed, didn't you?"



It had been more like she had had a cramp, than that she had laughed.

“That’s strange. If it had come from Sei-sama, you wouldn’t have taken it seriously.”

“Ah. No, I’m sorry.” If Sei-sama had said it, maybe she would have smiled. But Sachiko-sama has said it with such a serious face, she had never thought of it. Whether the same gag could be accepted or not was as much a matter of character as anything.

“Did you bring back anything for the first-years?”

“Yes. Shimako-san bought something for Noriko-chan, I got things for Tōko-chan and Kanako-chan. Yoshino-san expected to buy something nice, but somehow got a lot.”

“Did she get something nice?”

“No. So, excepting Kanako-chan and Tōko-chan. She got for the Hanadera crowd.”

“Hanadera...?”

“For their help with the school festival, the three guys who will help, and for Tōko-chan and Kanako-chan, the same.”

“I see. As thanks for their assistance.”

“Yes.

“You could say, for those people who are everybody’s friend.”

“You could say that, I guess.” Although she really didn’t know how the wind was blowing with Tōko-chan and Kanako-chan, she feared a misunderstanding that might happen if she did nothing, and since she felt that she should get them souvenirs, she went ahead and did it. Giving presents to people made her feel good after all. Whether they were welcome or not, once they were given, that would be done.

“I understand your feelings.” Sachiko-sama nodded. Then she stretched and muttered, “I’ll have to ask Tsutako-chan to make me some extra copies.”

“Huh?” When Yumi asked of which pictures, Sachiko-sama said “Who knows?” smiled and turned her back.

Perhaps, if she thought about it, she was being conceited, but that was missing the point. Don’t go flying up too high, it warned.

Maybe if she was too persistent in following, she would be scolded for being “unbecoming.” This morning, she could see many students going this way and that across the grounds. Everyone was giving souvenirs to their onee-sama and imouto.

“Are we finished already? I guess this wasn’t sufficient a push for you.” Sachiko-sama spoke over her shoulder. As if she was about to pile up yet another request upon her.

“Please, dare me.”

“Eventually.” As she spoke, Sachiko-sama fluttered her hand back and forth, then returned to her classroom.

In order to be able to read her onee-sama’s heart the way Shimako-san did, she would need a great deal more study.

“Although, every once in a while, it’s pretty easy to understand.”

Yumi, left alone in the garden, crossed her arms and muttered, “Uhn-uhn, I don’t understand.”

Part 2.

When the tall girl with long hair saw the large-eyed girl with the banana curls here, she did not smile.

Surely, something happened that would bring these two together, they were admonished.

“Yes.”

Yumi’s right and left hands held small boxes, which she handed over at that time to Kanako-chan and Tōko-chan.

“Souvenirs. Thank you for your help.” They were marble-pattered pens.

The two glanced at Yumi’s face, saying “Thank you very much” as they accepted them.

Not that she expected it, but it was hard to decide which one was not smiling the most.

But, somehow, even in this totally not-cute moment, they were both kind of cute, Yumi thought.

As if they were both twins, they turned back to back and looked to see what was in the boxes.

Part 3.

Now then, this is the sequel to the field trip.

That had been home one week. The climax of the school festival preparations was nearing, and she was in the Rose Mansion to eat lunch when Sachiko-sama said, “Do you have a moment,” put her hand on her shoulder and left the room ahead of her.

Because of her sour look, she wondered, “what have I done now?” and with her heart beating, followed her down the stairs.

“Um?” She went outside where Sachiko-sama, waiting against the outer wall, said, “You...” This was part of the central garden, but was in a blind corner from the school buildings and consequently, no one could see them.

“You. Why are you so bad at making arrangements?”

“Arrangements? You mean when I was so clumsy bringing in things for the Sports Festival? Or, did I mix up the order that the club presidents were addressed in?”

“That’s not what I mean. You do your Yamayurikai work well. And I appreciate that. But, really.” Sachiko-sama lifted her long hair, and heaved a heavy sigh. “You do things so casually, why should I have to come into it. And more importantly, you’ve forgotten how self-indulgent you were being, haven’t you?”

“What?”

That wasn’t about Yamayurikai work, but about something recent that inconvenienced Onee-sama. Yumi was caught up in thinking about it.

Sachiko-sama muttered with a “it can’t be helped” expression, “...This.”

“Eh? Ah-!”

Being held out in front of her eyes was the postcard she had mailed at Pisa.

“By the time I received it, how was I supposed to answer it? I see you every day.”

“Ah!”

Shoot.

That’s right. Shizuka-sama had said it, hadn’t she. Air Mail might take more or less time, depending. That must have been meant as a hint.

“When did it...?”

“Yesterday when I returned home, it had arrived.”

“Is that right.” Like a love letter written in the middle of the night with great joy, but when read later causes embarrassment, she heard this. It probably looked like the kind of thing one wrote on a trip, too, she thought. Moreover, it was a postcard. Who knew who among the Ogasawara household had seen or touched it, at which thought her face flamed.

“I’m sorry, Onee-sama. I shouldn’t have sent that letter.” As she reached out her hand to take it back Sachiko-sama lifted her arm to move it out of reach.

“Shouldn’t have sent it? Don’t joke like that. When I get the album filled with pictures of you, I’ve decided that this is going in there with them, isn’t it?”

“Huh?”

“I’ll never forget this for the rest of my life.” Although she still had an angry expression, there was a slight blush on her cheek now. Maybe not so angry then, Yumi noticed.

“Anyway, that’s what this was about.” Then, the conversation was over. Then, Sachiko-sama, who had moved away from the wall where she leaned, stopped after only a few steps.

And. “I wasn’t the only one being missed,” she said, then hurried her steps back to the Rose Mansion.

“I’ll never forget that for the rest of my life,” Yumi muttered as she watched Sachiko-sama’s back move off. And now, she and Sachiko-sama had the same red ears, as she could see her touch her earlobe.

“...I see. I understand.”

When Sachiko-sama was feeling shy, she would become seemingly angry. Mm.

Ciào, Sorella.

She looked up happily at the sky.

It was very blue.

Completely clear.

And straight ahead.

The Absence of Rosa Chinensis En Bouton

It was the last day of September.

The Rose Mansion was quiet.

No, not just the Rose Mansion. All of the school buildings were quiet. The second-years were gone. That was it.

Six classes worth. When you considered that the school was from kindergarten to college, that didn't seem like very much. However, when students who are normally there are gone, it leaves a sharp impression of inactivity.

After school, Rosa Chinensis, Ogasawara Sachiko was drinking tea alone in the Rose Mansion.

It was quiet.

Rei wasn't there. She was at her club.

She had decided to take a break, as there was no one else around and the only work to do was small, unimportant work associated with the school festival.

Because they had been so busy, the first-years had reported in.

It had been a long time since she had been able to go home early, but for some reason, her footsteps led her here. So she was sitting in the Rose Mansion, leisurely drinking tea. A luxurious time.

The biggest piece of work was preparation for the play sponsored by the Yamayurikai. But, since the second-years weren't here, this couldn't go smoothly.

While turning over a page of the script, Sachiko gave a small laugh.

When the cast and story were announced, the look on Yumi's face--. The memory was very enjoyable.

She helped herself to more tea. Seating herself, Sachiko inadvertently looked up.

"Hmm?" There was a feeling as if someone had come into the Rose Mansion. Because it was so quiet, it was possible to hear the door below open even on the second floor.

No one called out, but she could soon hear the squeaking sound of someone on the stairs. It might be someone who was used to going in and out of the Mansion. Sachiko put down her cup and opening the door that looked like a biscuit, waited.

Clank. And.

“Ah.” The words came from the visitor who had opened the door, who stiffened momentarily. She seemed to have come here not thinking that there was a person inside already.

As for Sachiko, she had at last had time to compose herself, knowing someone was coming up. But when she saw who the someone was, she was more than a little surprised.

“Good day,” Sachiko called out.

“G... Good day, Rosa Chinensis.” Coming to her senses, Hosokawa Kanako lowered her head. She had long hair and was very tall. “Please excuse me. When I heard that there was no meeting after school today, I thought that no one would be there.”

“So you came in?”

“...Yes, then.”

What had she come for, Sachiko was interested, as she watched Hosokawa Kanako pick up a bag that had been left by the window. It seemed as if she had come to get something she left behind.

Whatever the reason, Sachiko once again poured some tea and let her gaze drop to the script.

And, Hosokawa Kanako indicated that she was planning on leaving.

“Please. I don’t mind.” Sachiko commented.

“But.” She obviously did not want to intrude on an upperclassman who was here alone, doing a script check. Nevertheless, she gave off the feeling of being the kind of person who, if ordered to “go home” would have to be grabbed by the tie and pulled.

“Since you’re here, it’s fine. Please sit.” Sachiko indicated a seat with her finger. Do what you want. Tall Hosokawa Kanako did not appear to be anxious about standing there, doing nothing.

“Rosa Chinensis.”

“Eh?”

“You can’t possibly be comfortable thinking that I am here.”

“Didn’t I say that since you’re here, you might as well sit?” Ah, so troublesome. Sachiko face could plainly be seen to be fed up.

“N-o, that wasn’t it.” Hosokawa Kanako said. “I’m not talking about our conversation now.”

“Ahh-”

It looked like this was about something that was said when she was coming in and out of the Rose Mansion, helping with the school festival. Either way, that did not alter the fact that this was bothersome.

“You and Tōko-chan are coming here to help us, but.”

“But I’m an unpleasant sight, aren’t I?” She asked, completely straightforward.

“Why?”

“...The day before the Hanadera Academy festival, in the old greenhouse.”

So, that was what this was about. The girl felt bad about it, although it was just “that thing” to Sachiko.

“I said what I wanted to say at that time, it’s fine now.”

However, there was still the vague feeling of things that she wanted to say being left over. After that day, of course the two of them had met each other’s gaze but, there had never been a chance to exchange words alone, until today.

“You’ve forgiven me for hurting your precious Yumi-sama?” Hosokawa Kanako’s words held a little sarcasm.

“Forgive or not forgive. It’s the same to you, I’m not the world’s law. Don’t mistake me, I may certainly have hurt other people that I don’t know about. I’m just an imperfect human... I’m not in a position to judge.”

“Imperfect... What would your followers say if they heard Rosa Chinensis say that?”

“If you want to know, ask them,” Sachiko said, her voice rising.

For generation after generation, a too-perfect image had attached to the Rosas. However, The distance between the Yamayurikai management and the normal student body was not easily breached. They had lives that were admired. However, it was not their intention to be deified.

“If I think about it even a little, it’s easy to understand why Yumi is popular with the first-years.”

“Why are you having this conversation with me.”

“Who knows.” Why indeed, Sachiko muttered. She didn’t know herself why.

“So then, you wouldn’t mind if I became Yumi-sama’s sœur?”

“If you were the one Yumi chose. I would have no objection.”

The westering sun came in through the curtains, and small shadows. These were most likely from clouds.

“But, I thought you did not want to become Yumi’s sœur?”

“Yes.”

“So, then it’s fine isn’t it.”

“That’s true.”

Silence.

“I would like more tea.” So, Hosokawa Kanako stood up.

“You want me to say that I don’t mind if I do?”

“No. I meant to say that I would like to drink more, that’s all.”

“That’s all, huh. Then, if you wouldn’t mind.” Sachiko held out her cup.

And both of them, from that point on sat quietly in the room, drinking their tea, then eventually left to go home.